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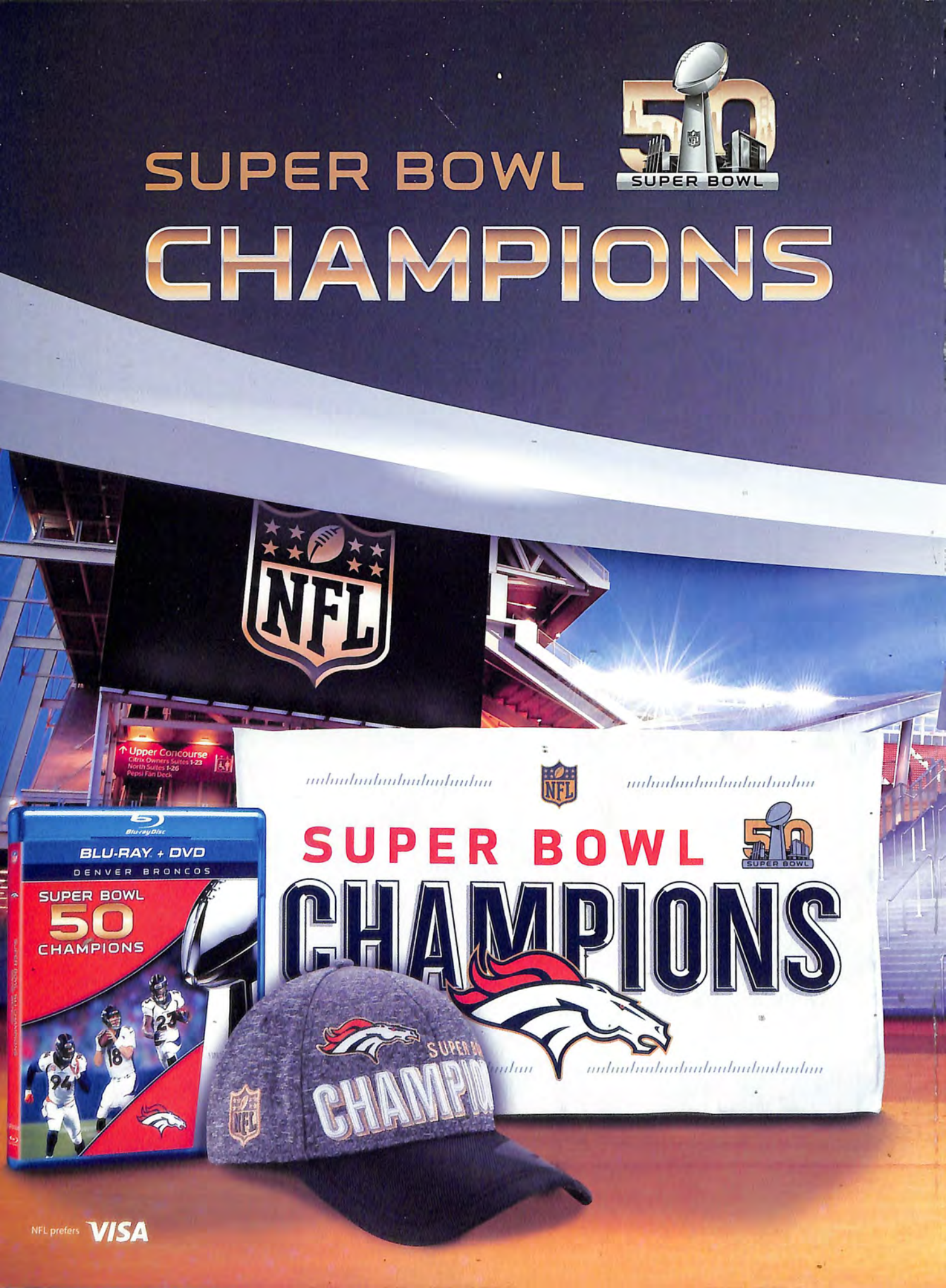
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ALONE AT THE TOP
With some help from his friends, Manning became the oldest quarterback to win the Super Bowl and the only QB to lead different franchises to the title.

Photograph by
DEANNE FITZMAURICE
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

COVER
Photograph by
SIMON BRUTY
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TRENDING UP

By beating the Panthers in Santa Clara, the Broncos scored one for smashmouth football and took home their first Lombardi Trophy since 1999

BY TIM LAYDEN

FOR MOST cities with NFL franchises, there is a line that stretches from some distant beginning to the celebration of a Super Bowl victory, measuring the sweat equity in the journey and the love that endures between a team and its fans. Some lines are shorter than others, and some have more towering highs and crushing lows. Yet there is no city that knows every inch of this shared experience better than Denver, whose Broncos stood beneath the snowstorm of confetti that fell upon them in Santa Clara, champions for the third time in their history, risen again to the top of their sport, the players rewarded for persevering in a season that was nearly lost in the chill of late autumn, their fans for having faith when the day was darkest and hope was nearly gone.

They will tell their children about a quarterback in the twilight of his greatness, so beaten and aged as to almost disappear, only to return and patch together a miracle despite his withered arm and injured foot. They will tell about a coach who once carried a clipboard on this very sideline, who coaxed greatness from his team while the man for whom that coach once played understudy watched from the front office after building the roster. They will tell the story of how a defense carried them in the end. A defense that Patriots mastermind Tom Brady couldn't defeat, even with all his rings; a defense that Panthers ace Cam Newton couldn't defeat, even with all his skills. Because in Denver it has always been about quarterbacks and defense. They will also explain that it really took a whole team, and a whole city, to bring the Lombardi Trophy home to the mountains.

Maybe they will explain that the historic line to this triumph started more than 50 years ago, when a baseball owner started the Denver Broncos in the American Football League. In more than a decade they never had a winning season and never played in the fledging league's title game. But they were beloved just the same, and come 1978 the Broncos and their Orange Crush defense reached the Super Bowl, only to be crushed in kind by the Cowboys, 27–10. So began a pattern. The Broncos returned to the Super Bowl with regularity but always lost, and badly. They lost to the royalty of the old NFL: to the Giants (and Phil Simms's historic passing performance), the Redskins (and Doug Williams's barrier-breaking game) and the 49ers (in Joe Montana's fourth Super Bowl win). They were often on the wrong side of history.

Twenty-four years into the life of the Super Bowl, the winless Broncos had joined the winless Vikings as the only four-time losers on the game's biggest stage. Yet they remained one of the league's most popular franchises, entrenched a mile high in the Rockies. And then came the savior: John Elway quarterbacked the Broncos to consecutive titles as the millennium drew to a close, helicoptering through the air on the most famous run from scrimmage in the franchise's history.

ONE FIGURE REMAINED A CONSTANT: OWNER PAT BOWLEN. HE BROUGHT BACK ELWAY AND PLACED HIM IN CHARGE IN JANUARY 2011.

Four times in the post-Elway era the Broncos returned to the playoffs, but never to the Super Bowl. For five years after that they missed the playoffs altogether, consigned to inconsequence. But one figure remained constant: owner Pat Bowlen, whose family bought the Broncos in 1984. Under his stewardship the pieces came back together. Bowlen, who now suffers from Alzheimer's disease, brought back Elway and placed him in charge of football operations in January 2011, with the stench of a 4–12

SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES

season still in the air. Peyton Manning, quarterback royalty like Elway, signed in 2012, ending the brief and bizarre Tim Tebow era. Manning led the Broncos to 38 regular-season wins in three years and one embarrassing Super Bowl loss. Meanwhile a defense was built. Quarterbacks and defense. It was always quarterbacks and defense in Denver.

The Broncos found one linebacker, Von Miller, in the same 2011 draft in which Newton went first, and another, Danny Trevathan, a year later. In 2014 they acquired proven veterans, linebacker DeMarcus Ware and corner Aqib Talib. Those players formed the foundation of a defense that was best in the league in 2015, Orange Crush Redux. And none too soon.

It wasn't going to be easy for Manning. Four neck surgeries had lengthened his career, but not interminably. Coach Gary Kubiak arrived and moved Manning from his beloved shotgun to a position under center, and they danced uneasily into November, when Manning completed five passes to his receivers and four to the Chiefs in a 29–13 loss that seemed to signal the end of hope. Then the strangest thing happened, the kind of thing that happens in fairy tales. Manning took nearly two months off while Brock Osweiler guided the Broncos to a 5–2 record and a first-round playoff bye. When Manning came back in the first playoff game, he was a new man, not so much rejuvenated as humbled. He was happy to manage Kubiak's game while the defense dominated.

DRAWING EVEN?
The Broncos have still lost more Super Bowls than they've won—five to three—but with Elway, Kubiak and a strong defense, they aim to change the score.

A city watched again in wonder. It was enough. Pittsburgh fell and then New England. And in a coastal California city upstart Carolina was told to wait its turn. A battered old quarterback rode the fury of a powerful defense. A city embraced its team. An old story, made new again. □

9/13/15 AT DENVER
BRONCOS 19, RAVENS 13

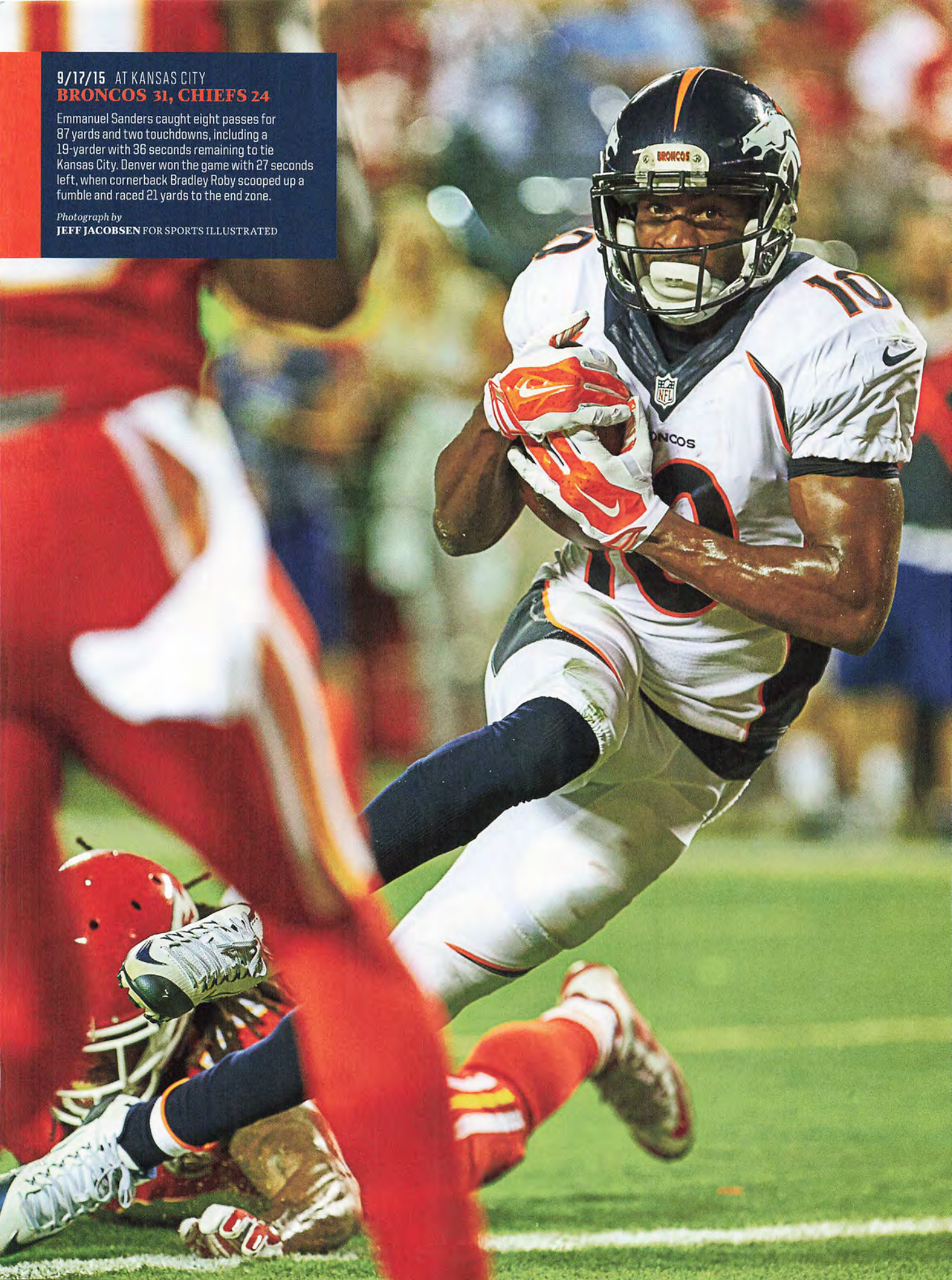
Unlike their mascot, Miles, the Broncos weren't horsing around in their opening-week matchup. As would be the case throughout the year, the Denver defense came up big: Cornerback Aqib Talib's 51-yard interception return for a touchdown in the third quarter proved decisive.

Photograph by
JAMIE SCHWABEROW FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

THE SEASON IN *tures*

Behind a stout running game, the No. 1 defense and an era-defining quarterback, the Broncos produced a dominant season on the way to the top seed in the AFC

BY JEREMY FUCHS



9/17/15 AT KANSAS CITY
BRONCOS 31, CHIEFS 24

Emmanuel Sanders caught eight passes for 87 yards and two touchdowns, including a 19-yarder with 36 seconds remaining to tie Kansas City. Denver won the game with 27 seconds left, when cornerback Bradley Roby scooped up a fumble and raced 21 yards to the end zone.

Photograph by
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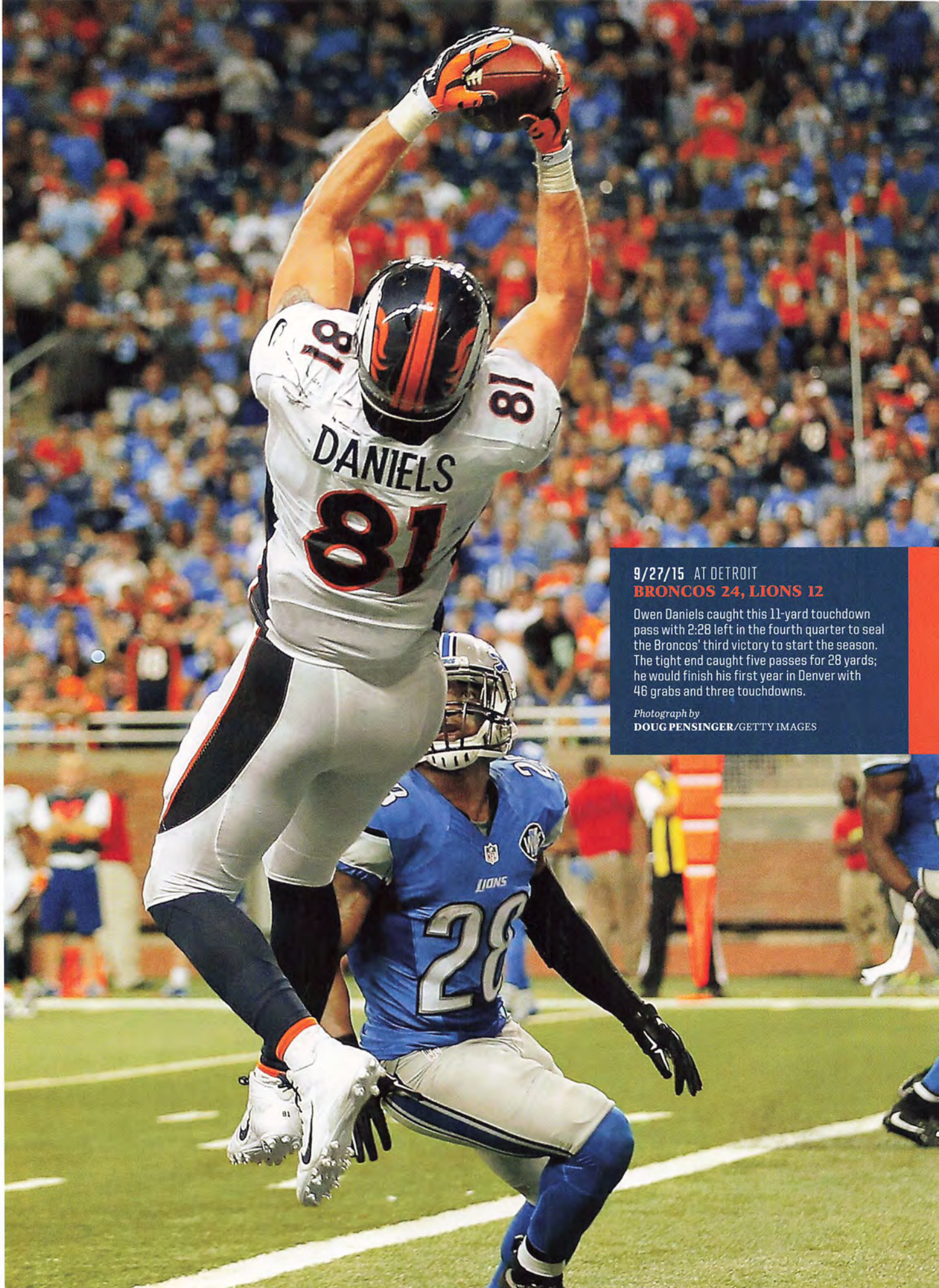

9/27/15 AT DETROIT
BRONCOS 24, LIONS 12

Owen Daniels caught this 11-yard touchdown pass with 2:28 left in the fourth quarter to seal the Broncos' third victory to start the season. The tight end caught five passes for 28 yards; he would finish his first year in Denver with 46 grabs and three touchdowns.

Photograph by
DOUG PENSINGER/GETTY IMAGES

58
94

10/4/15 AT DENVER

BRONCOS 23, VIKINGS 20

DeMarcus Ware (94), Von Miller (58) and Malik Jackson (97) teamed up for this second-quarter takedown of QB Teddy Bridgewater. The Broncos' D racked up seven sacks and forced three fumbles, including one on Minnesota's final drive that sealed a fourth straight win.

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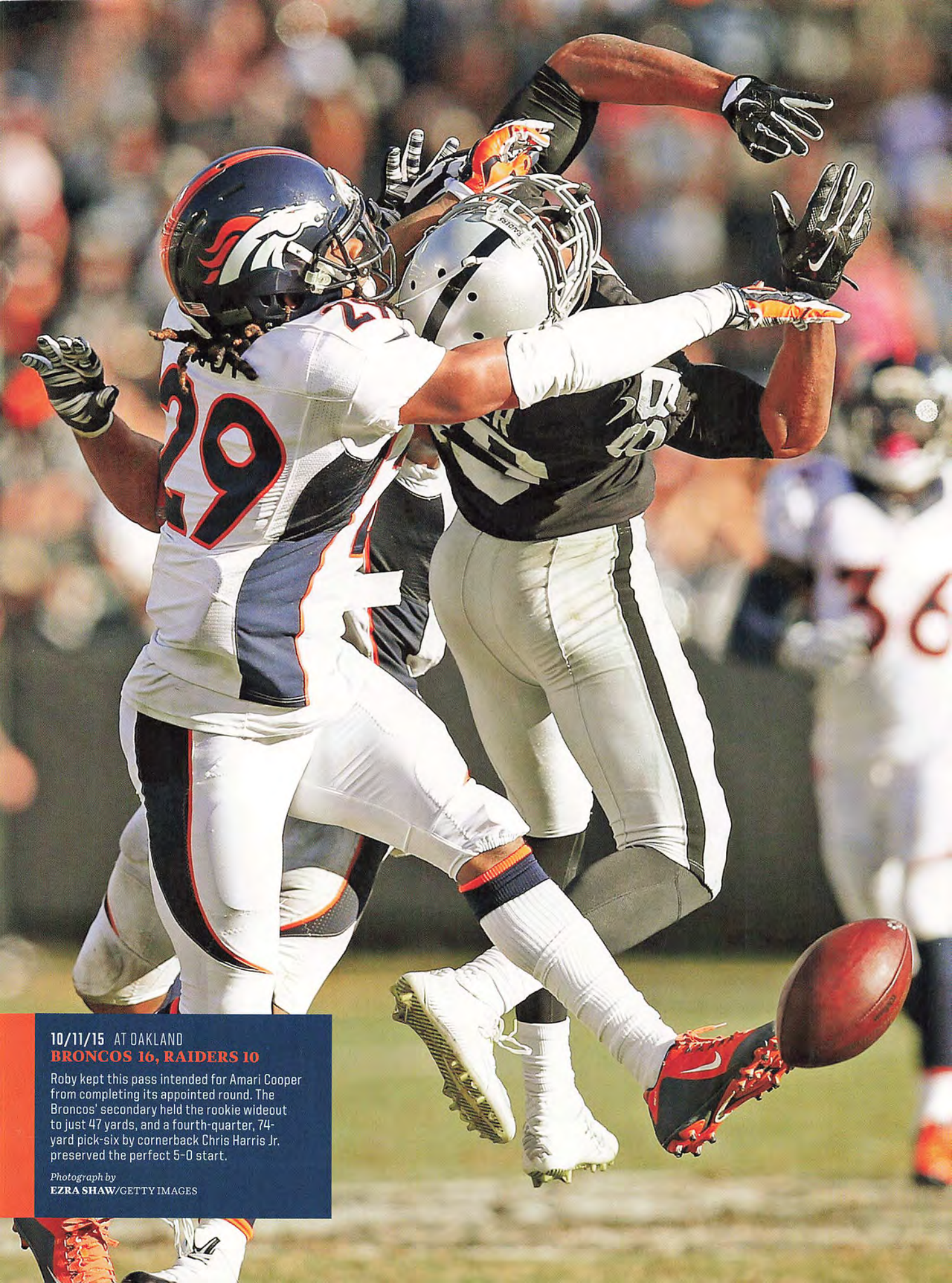
JOE MAHONEY/AP



10/11/15 AT OAKLAND
BRONCOS 16, RAIDERS 10

Roby kept this pass intended for Amari Cooper from completing its appointed round. The Broncos' secondary held the rookie wideout to just 47 yards, and a fourth-quarter, 74-yard pick-six by cornerback Chris Harris Jr. preserved the perfect 5-0 start.

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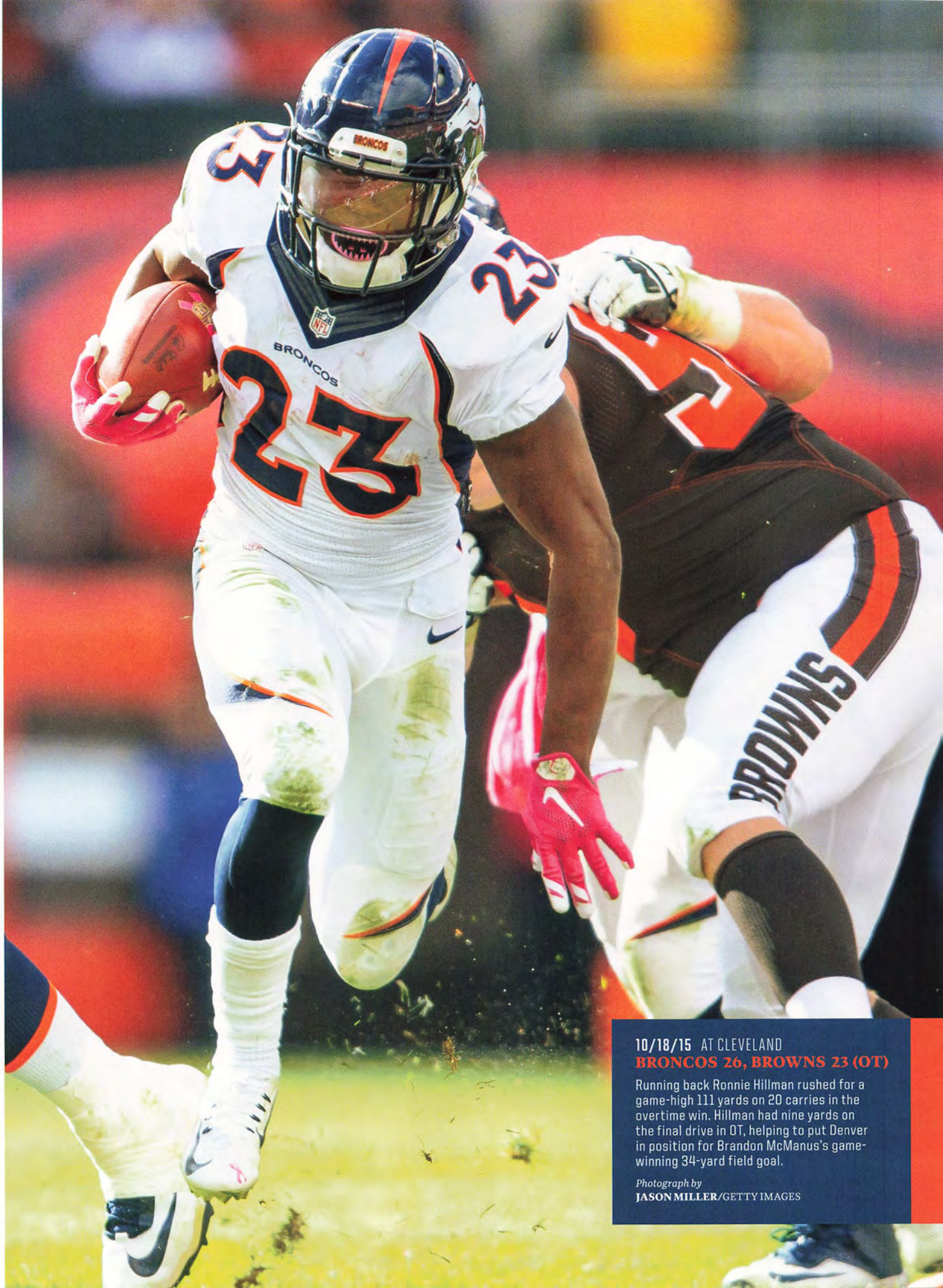

10/18/15 AT CLEVELAND
BRONCOS 26, BROWNS 23 (OT)

Running back Ronnie Hillman rushed for a game-high 111 yards on 20 carries in the overtime win. Hillman had nine yards on the final drive in OT, helping to put Denver in position for Brandon McManus's game-winning 34-yard field goal.

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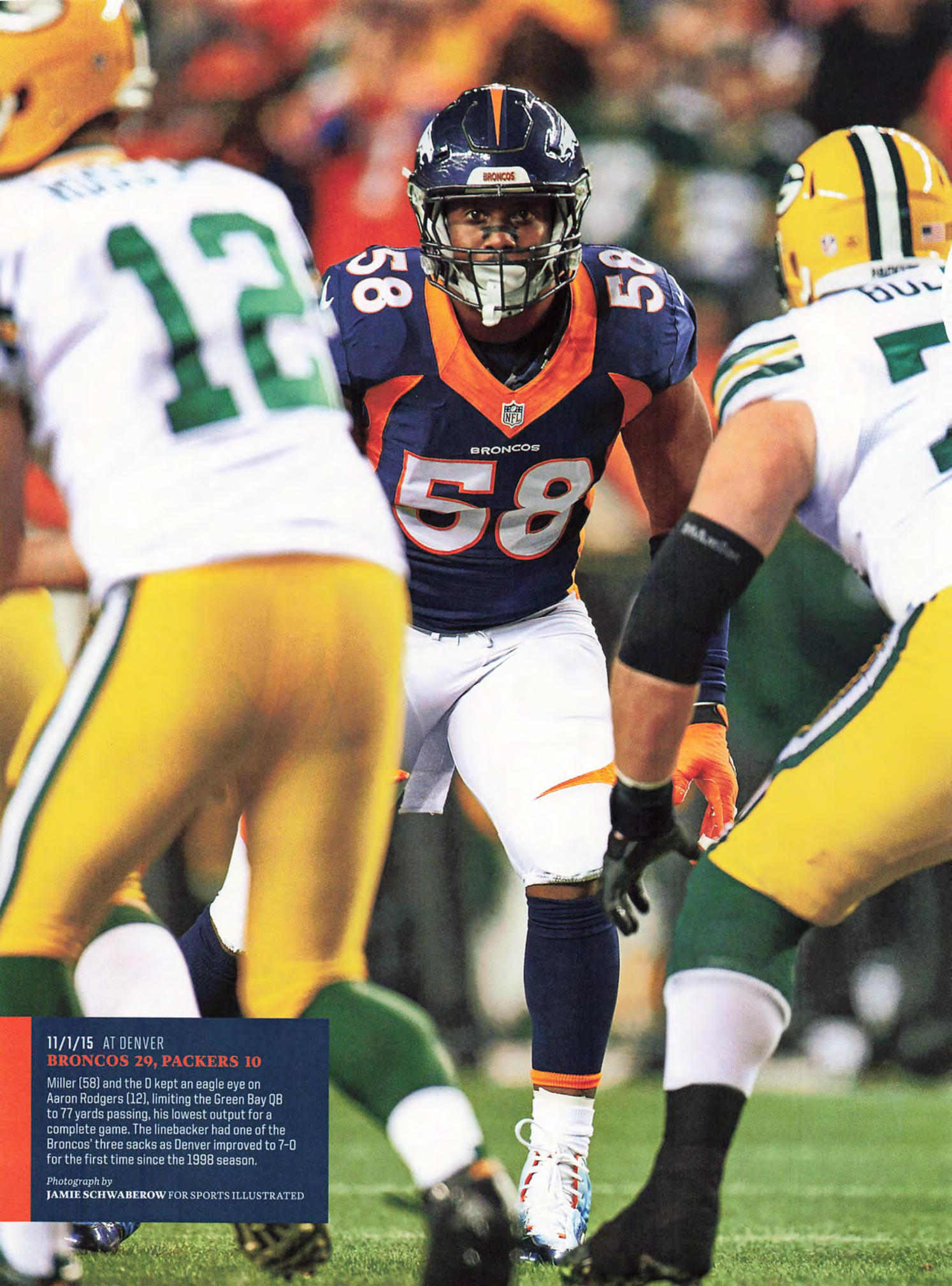

11/1/15 AT DENVER
BRONCOS 29, PACKERS 10

Miller (58) and the D kept an eagle eye on Aaron Rodgers (12), limiting the Green Bay QB to 77 yards passing, his lowest output for a complete game. The linebacker had one of the Broncos' three sacks as Denver improved to 7-0 for the first time since the 1998 season.

Photograph by
JAMIE SCHWABEROW FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

11/8/15 AT INDIANAPOLIS
COLTS 27, BRONCOS 24

Omar Bolden ran this second-quarter punt back 83 yards for a touchdown—his longest return of the season—but it wasn't enough to avert Denver's first loss. The Broncos tied the game with a Daniels TD catch with 8:54 left, only to be undone by Adam Vinatieri's 55-yard field goal 2:41 later.

Photograph by
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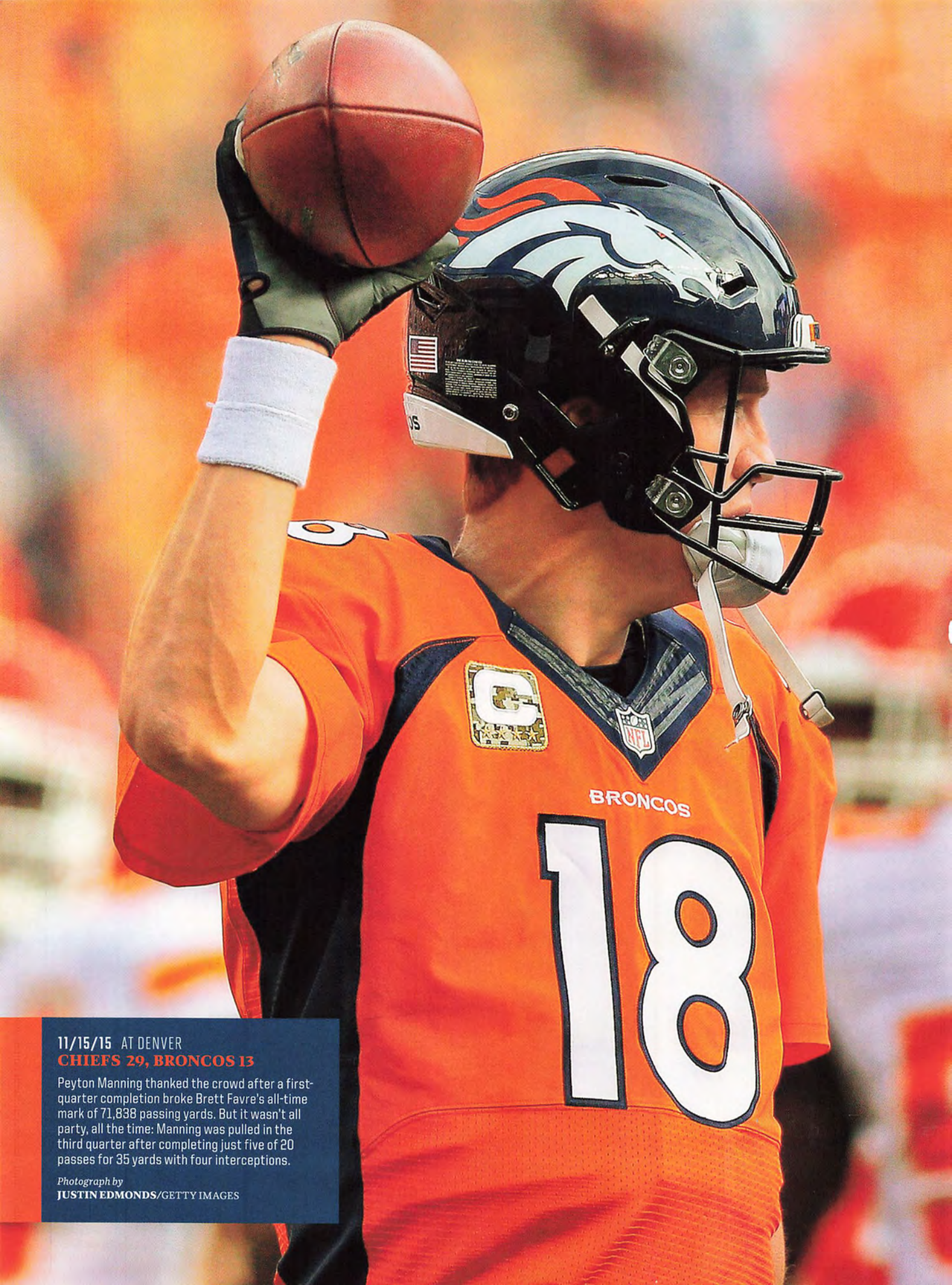

11/15/15 AT DENVER
CHIEFS 29, BRONCOS 13

Peyton Manning thanked the crowd after a first-quarter completion broke Brett Favre's all-time mark of 71,838 passing yards. But it wasn't all party, all the time: Manning was pulled in the third quarter after completing just five of 20 passes for 35 yards with four interceptions.

Photograph by
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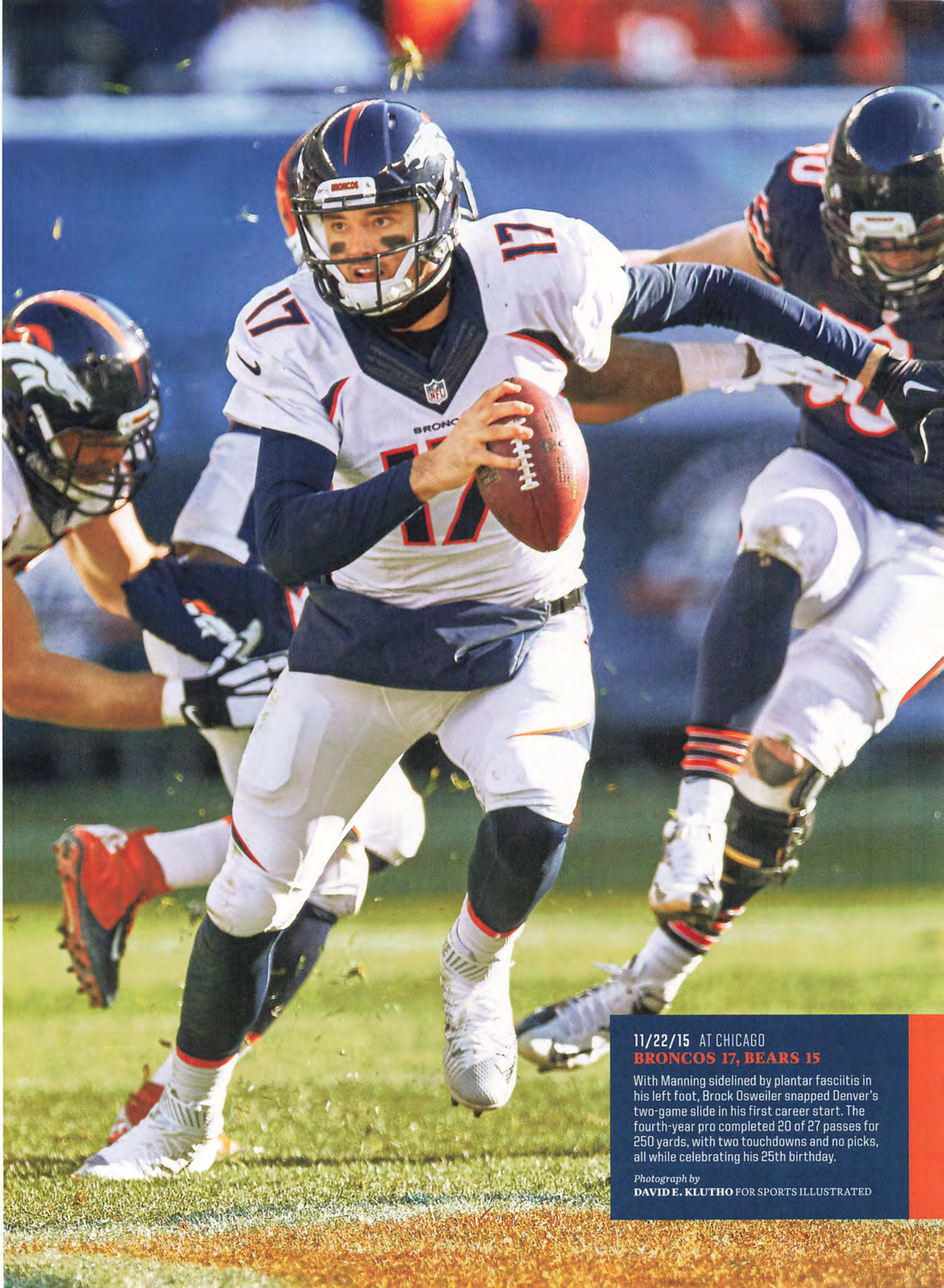

11/22/15 AT CHICAGO
BRONCOS 17, BEARS 15

With Manning sidelined by plantar fasciitis in his left foot, Brock Osweiler snapped Denver's two-game slide in his first career start. The fourth-year pro completed 20 of 27 passes for 250 yards, with two touchdowns and no picks, all while celebrating his 25th birthday.

Photograph by
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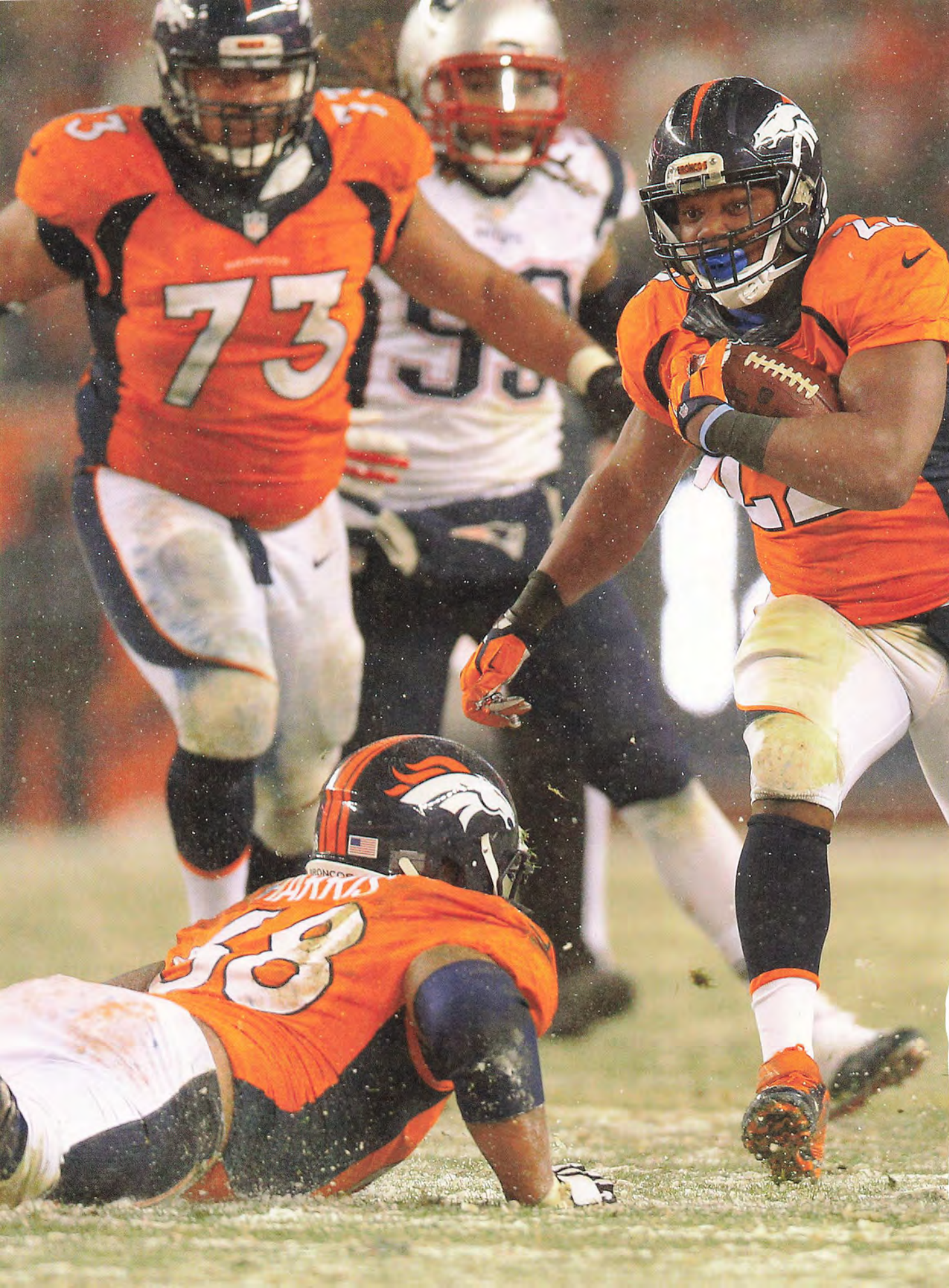
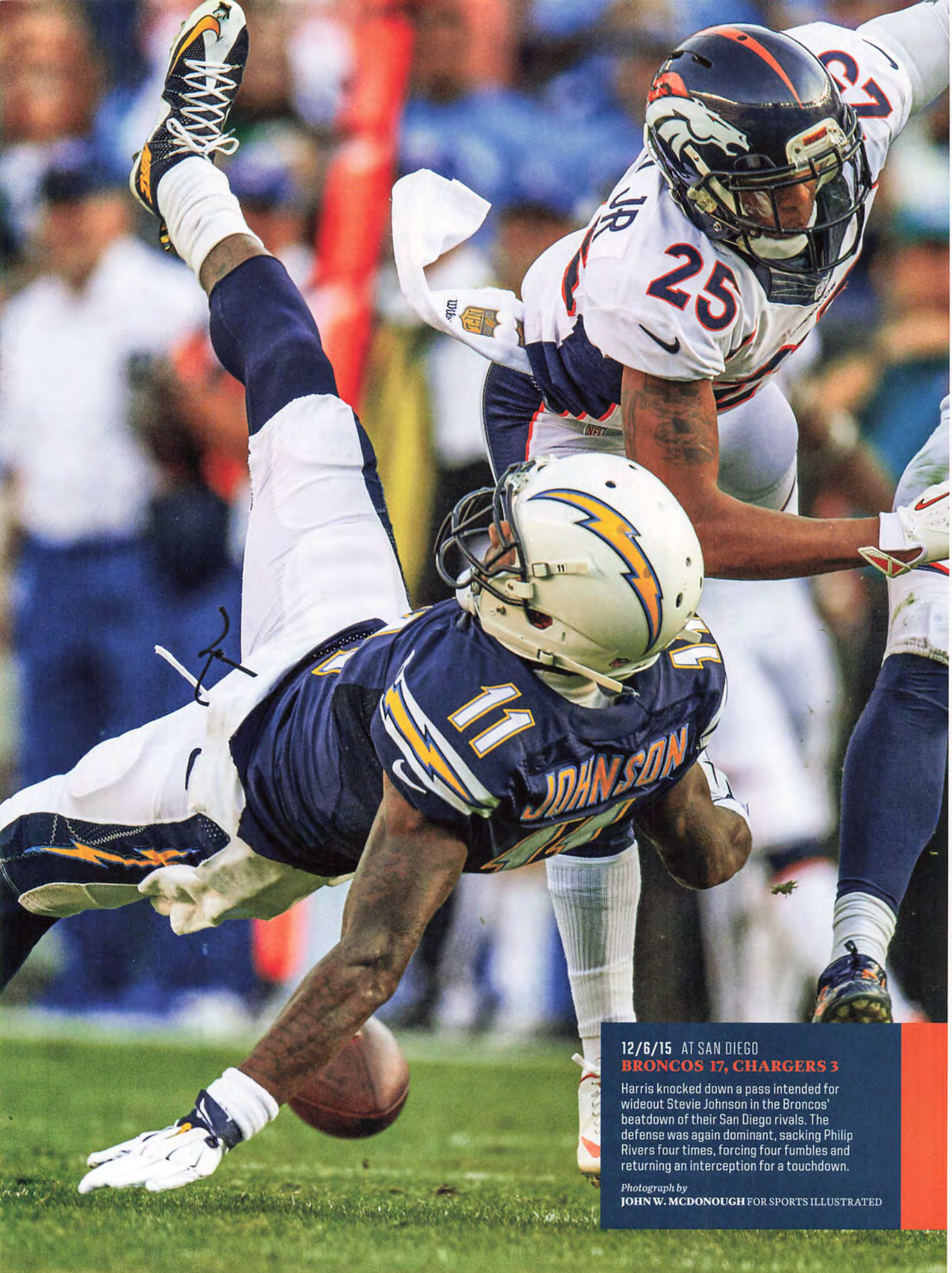

73
58

11/29/15 AT DENVER

BRONCOS 30, PATRIOTS 24 (OT)

Osweiler-Brady isn't quite as sexy as Manning-Brady, but this matchup didn't disappoint fans. C.J. Anderson (22) rushed for 113 yards on 15 carries and two TDs, including this game-winning 48-yard scamper in overtime, helping to land Denver's new QB on SI's cover that week.

Photograph by
JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES



12/6/15 AT SAN DIEGO
BRONCOS 17, CHARGERS 3

Harris knocked down a pass intended for wideout Stevie Johnson in the Broncos' beatdown of their San Diego rivals. The defense was again dominant, sacking Philip Rivers four times, forcing four fumbles and returning an interception for a touchdown.

Photograph by
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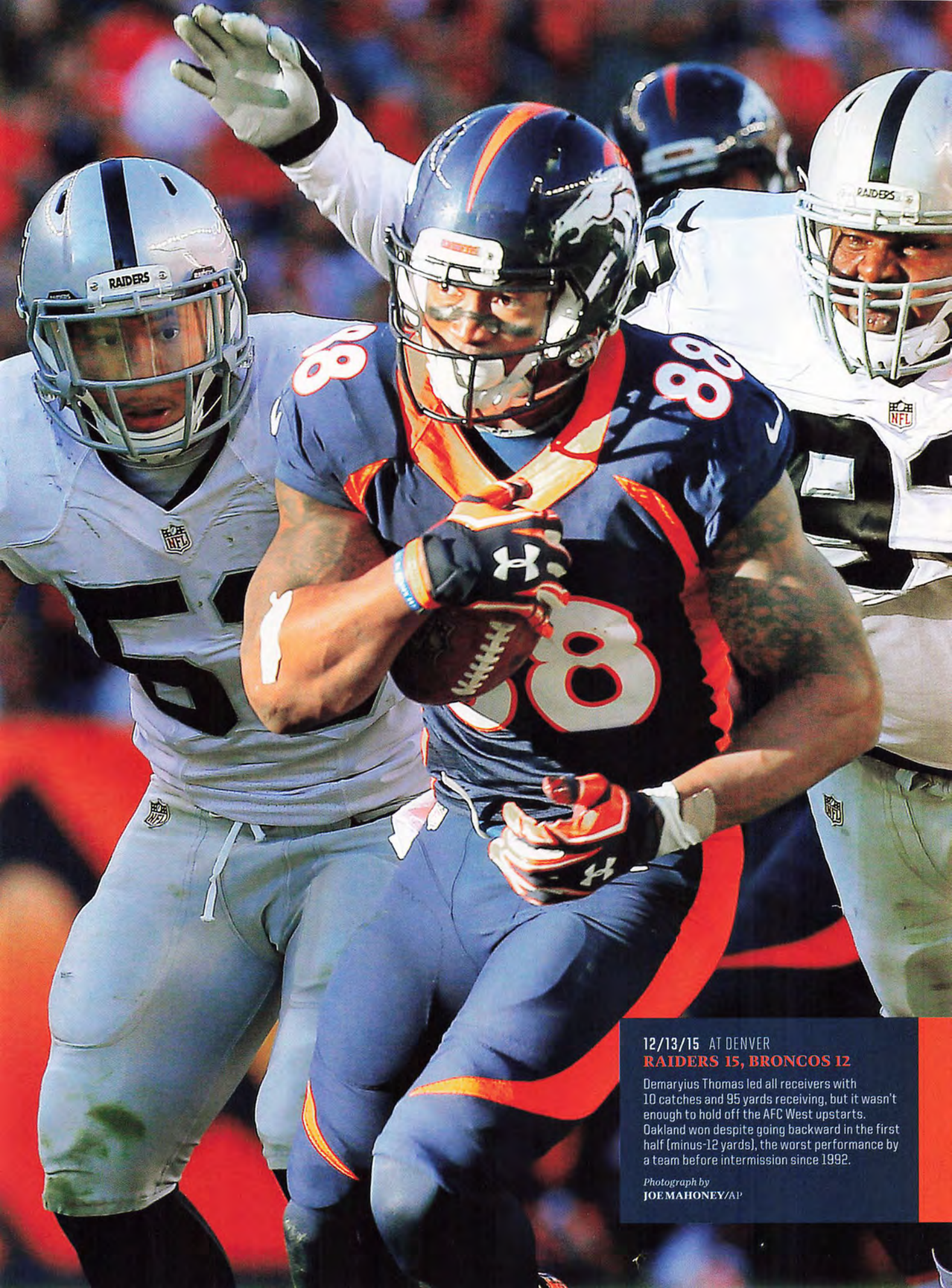
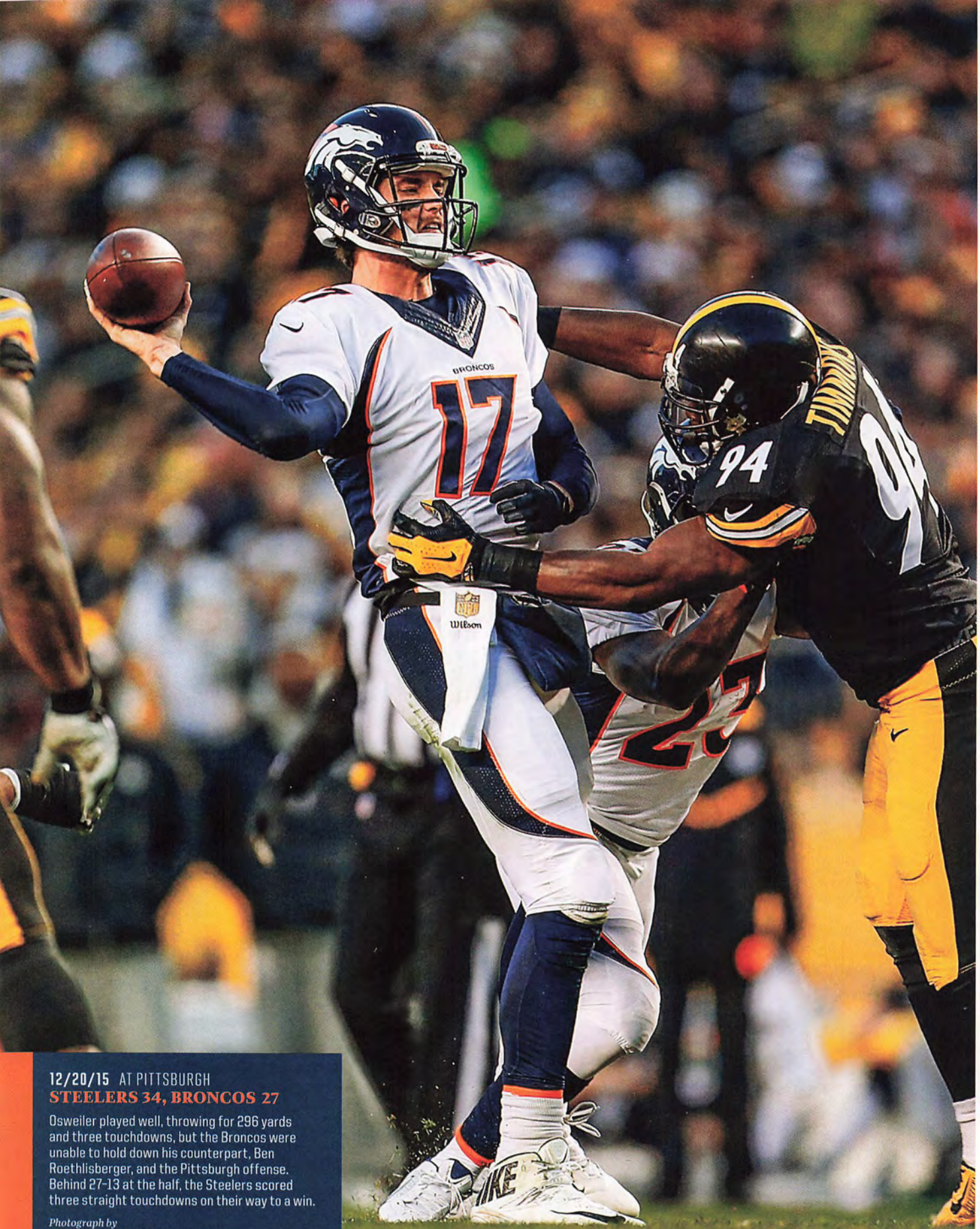


12/13/15 AT DENVER
RAIDERS 15, BRONCOS 12

Demaryius Thomas led all receivers with 10 catches and 95 yards receiving, but it wasn't enough to hold off the AFC West upstarts. Oakland won despite going backward in the first half (minus-12 yards), the worst performance by a team before intermission since 1992.

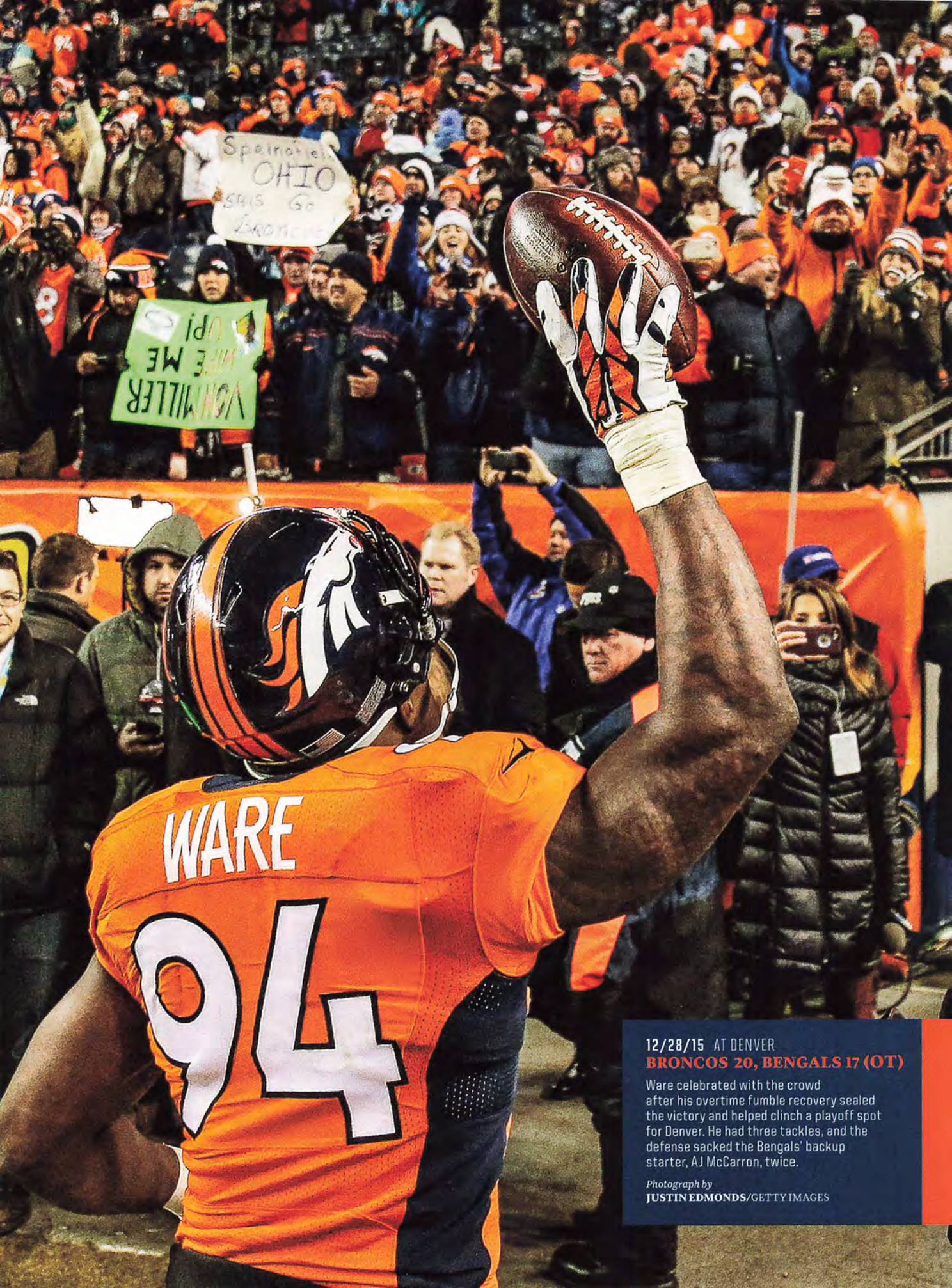
Photograph by
JOE MAHONEY/AP



12/20/15 AT PITTSBURGH
STEELERS 34, BRONCOS 27

Osweiler played well, throwing for 296 yards and three touchdowns, but the Broncos were unable to hold down his counterpart, Ben Roethlisberger, and the Pittsburgh offense. Behind 27-13 at the half, the Steelers scored three straight touchdowns on their way to a win.

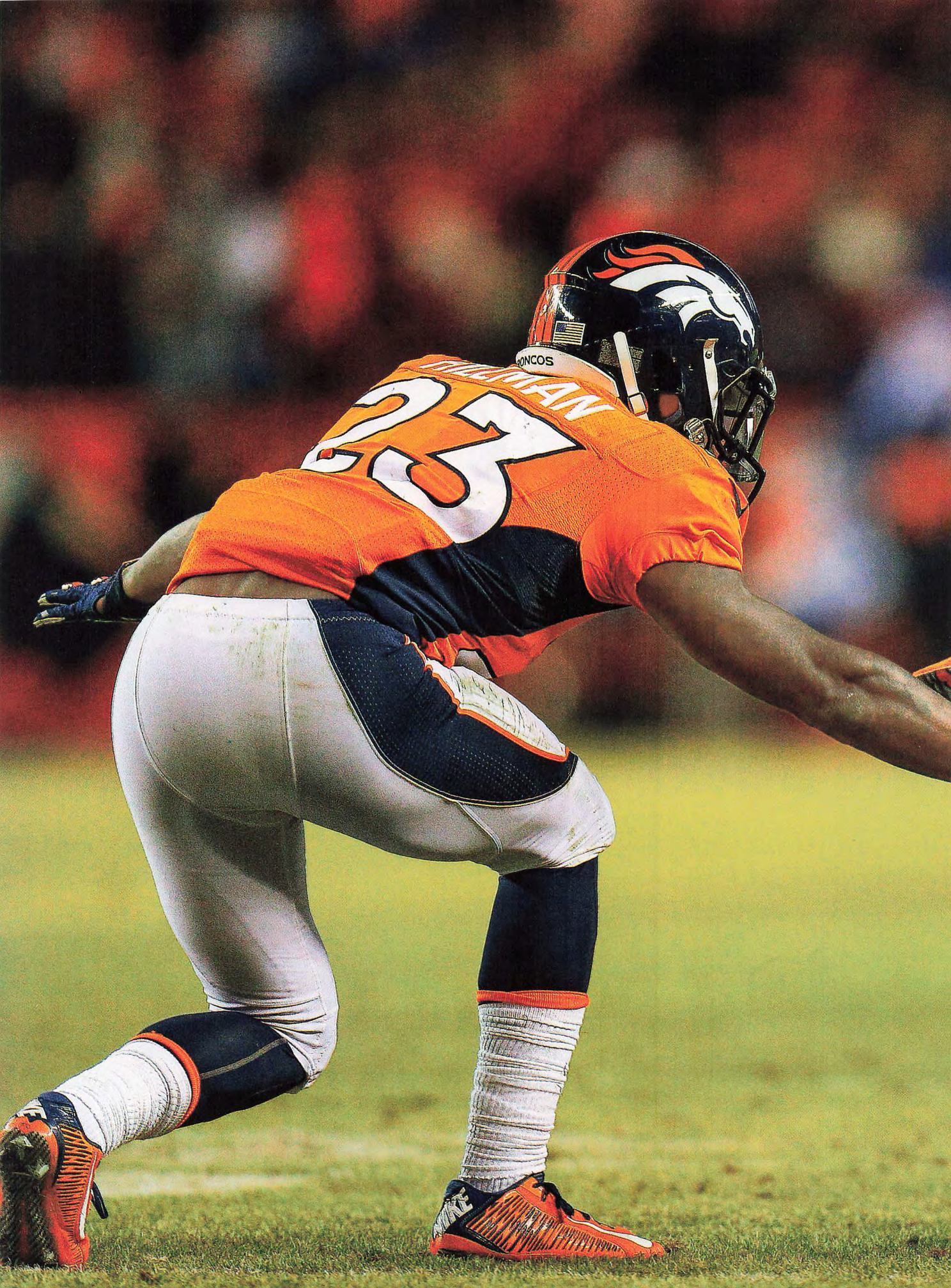
Photograph by
GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES



12/28/15 AT DENVER
BRONCOS 20, BENGALS 17 (OT)

Ware celebrated with the crowd after his overtime fumble recovery sealed the victory and helped clinch a playoff spot for Denver. He had three tackles, and the defense sacked the Bengals' backup starter, AJ McCarron, twice.

Photograph by
JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES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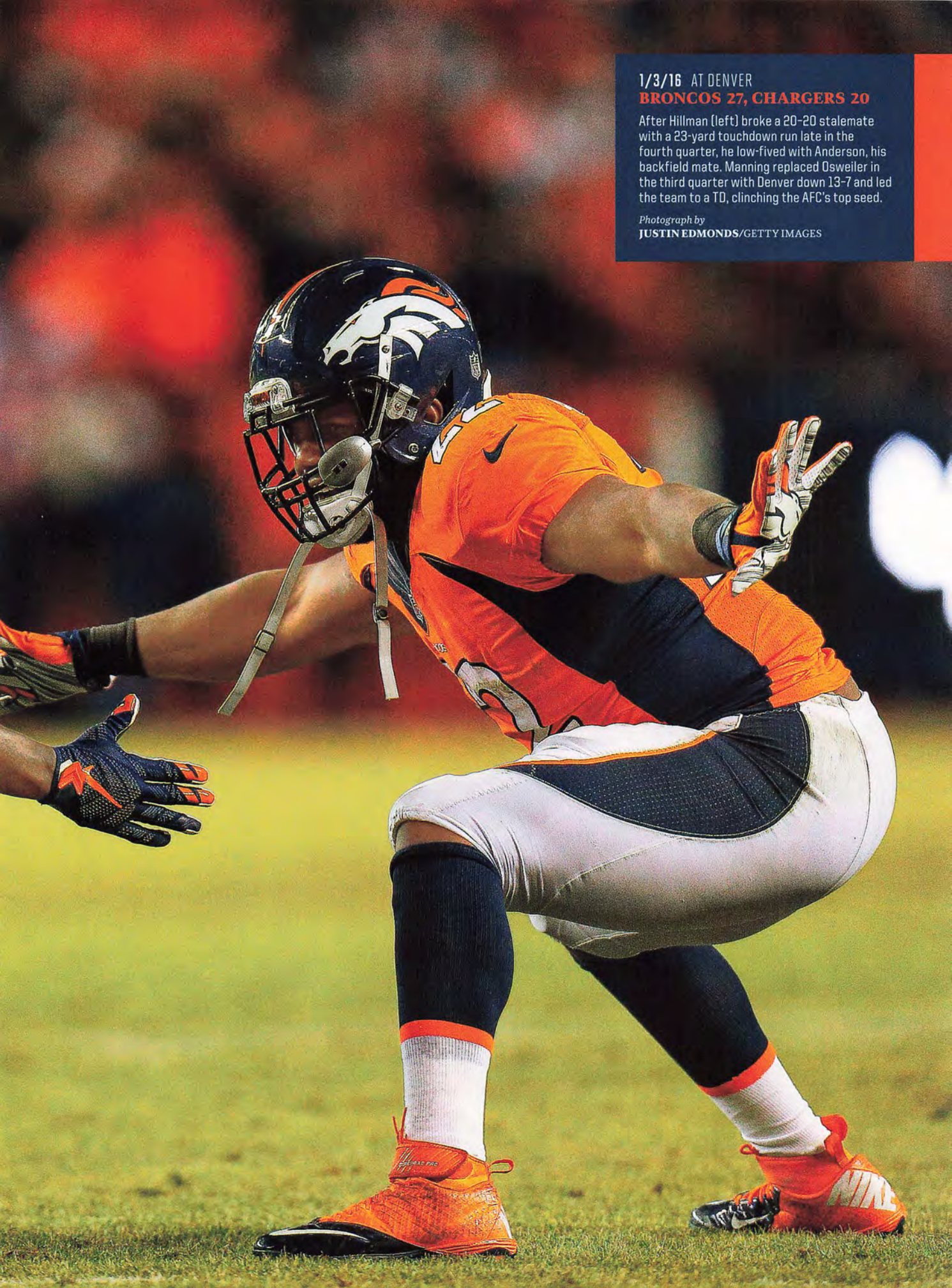


1/3/16 AT DENVER
BRONCOS 27, CHARGERS 20

After Hillman (left) broke a 20-20 stalemate with a 23-yard touchdown run late in the fourth quarter, he low-fived with Anderson, his backfield mate. Manning replaced Osweiler in the third quarter with Denver down 13-7 and led the team to a TD, clinching the AFC's top seed.

Photograph by
JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

FIRED UP
The Broncos, who finally secured home field advantage in Week 17, needed every edge they could get to reach the Super Bowl.

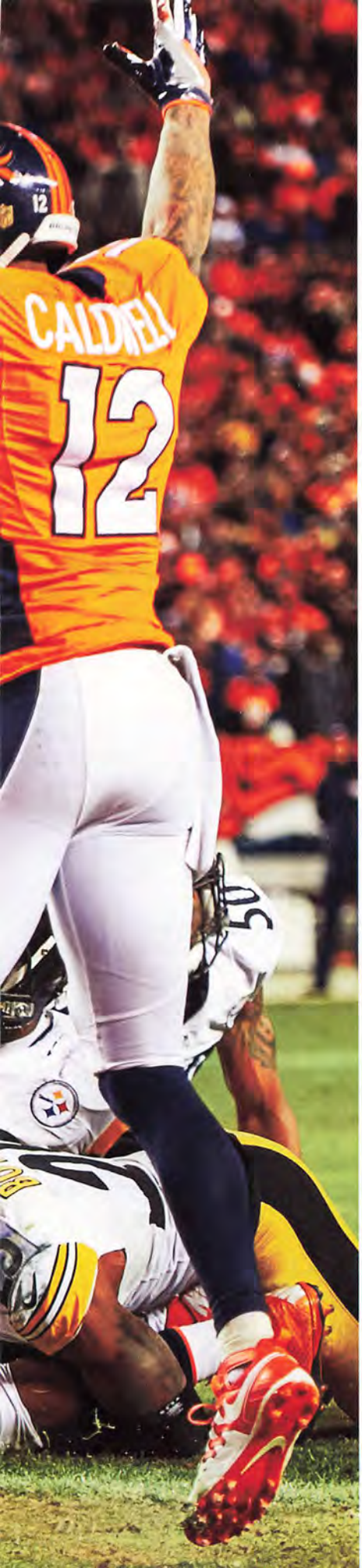
THE Playo

ffs

In a postseason run made for fans of old-school football, the Broncos won a pair of low-scoring slugfests on their way to Super Bowl triumph

Photograph by
ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

GROUND UP
Anderson provided the late-game heroics, putting the Broncos ahead by scoring their only touchdown with three minutes remaining.



From THE MMQB
January 19, 2016

AFC DIVISIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

THE NEW NORMAL

Peyton Manning as a game manager was a little difficult for fans to accept, but the Broncos are hoping a turnover-free quarterback and the best defense in football can beat the Patriots and reach Santa Clara

BY ROBERT MAYS

Photographs by
ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

THE SIGHT is still hard to fathom. On his own 38-yard line, facing the type of third-and-11 that feels insurmountable these days, Peyton Manning sailed another incompletion over receiver Demaryius Thomas to send the Broncos' punt team back onto the field. Restlessness was in the wind that whipped through Sports Authority Field. As the third quarter wound down, Denver trailed Pittsburgh 13–12 and had failed to find a spark on offense all afternoon.

Even without receiver Antonio Brown and running back DeAngelo Williams, the Steelers' offense had shown more pop than the Broncos', and as Denver was relegated to squeezing field goals out of feeble drives, one big play by Pittsburgh receiver Martavis Bryant could put the game out of reach. The Broncos needed *their* game-altering play to come when they didn't have the ball, so when Britton Colquitt's punt careened off the hands of Steelers returner Markus Wheaton and skipped toward the goal line, there was a sense of desperation in the Broncos' scramble for the ball.

The muffed punt wouldn't be Denver's break, but the Broncos did get their big play a quarter later, when corner Bradley Roby punched the ball from running back Fitzgerald Toussaint's grasp and linebacker DeMarcus

Ware pounced on the fumble on Denver's 35-yard line. After the Broncos' 23–16 win, Roby said he had been just one of several Denver defenders preaching the need for a turnover as the second half wore on. In the huddle, on the sideline, they knew they had to be the ones to jump-start the team. The fumble recovery led to the Broncos' only touchdown of the game—and their first in 12 drives—but even that march relied on the legs of backs C.J. Anderson and Ronnie Hillman. Manning spent much of the drive under center, a clear concession to a ground attack that had become potent over the second half of the season.

It was only two years ago that the Broncos were exploding scoreboards and shredding record books. When 2013 ended, Manning's offense was the most prolific of all time. (He threw a record 55 touchdown passes and the team scored 606 points, another record.) On Sunday night the conversation about Manning couldn't have been more different. "He managed the game right," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "No turnovers. That's all we need."

Peyton Manning, game manager is tough to swallow. The numbers probably aren't worth repeating. Manning is the most accomplished passer in NFL history, but as the Broncos prepare to face the Patriots in the AFC championship game, the two defining players of the NFL's past decade and a half have assumed markedly different roles. Tom Brady continues to be the engine of a Patriots offense that remains one of the league's best, while Manning is forced to rely on the rest of his team to carry him toward the finish line. "Our defense has been outstanding all season," Manning said. "They've led us to this point. Let's make that clear." Right now, that's the only recipe the Broncos have, and the ingredients that make it work require a delicate balance.

BY NOW the Broncos have settled into their new world. Denver had to lean on its defense and running game down the stretch last season, but back then it was possible to ascribe Manning's struggles to a hurt quad or a weary arm. This season he was off from the start, and anyone who remembers the way Manning looked in September probably knew there would be no heroics on Sunday or any other time this postseason. In laying out how his team scraped together 13 wins in the past five months, Manning went all the way back to the opener against Baltimore, in which safeties David Bruton and Darian Stewart collaborated on an interception that turned the tide in a 19–13 win, and to the week after, when Roby was again the hero on a fumble return against the Chiefs that sparked a 31–24 victory. "Different guys have stepped up at different times all season," Manning said.

The members of the Denver defense—decidedly the league's best all year—have come to understand the burden on them, and they seem to embrace it. "We just came out and did what we do, what we've been doing," linebacker Von Miller said afterward. "It's nothing new now."

Harris doesn't know exactly when he realized that the Broncos' identity had shifted, but he believes it was some time ago. "I'm gonna say early, man," Harris said. "Pretty much all year, it's been kind of like this. There have been situations all year where we had to win it on defense."

Winning ugly is one way to

PITTSBURGH LINEBACKER JAMES HARRISON SAID IT BEST ON SUNDAY NIGHT: **MANNING'S VALUE TO THE BRONCOS IS "ALL ABOVE THE NECK."**

TAG TEAM
Sanders (left) led the team with five catches for 85 yards, while Manning, who completed only 21 passes for 222 yards, avoided interceptions and gave his defense and special teams a chance to win the game.

88
18
22

win, but it's also one way to fray a lot of nerves. Denver was 9–3 in games decided by a touchdown or less this season, and although nearly every Bronco asked about that record said it helped him stay confident in circumstances like the ones against Pittsburgh, Roby admitted that "it would be nice if we didn't put ourselves in that situation." As points have been harder to come by, the margin for error has shrunk. Not being able to ride Manning's arm has meant having to rely on contributions from unlikely sources.

Among the most vital Broncos on the field against Pittsburgh was reserve corner and (more notably) punt gunner Kayvon Webster. Over and over Webster made plays down the left sideline to help the Broncos gain a few crucial yards of field position, including one huge hit that limited Wheaton to a one-yard return. "Kayvon Webster was the momentum giver," Miller said. And what made Webster's performance all the more impressive, according to Miller, is that "he was sick all day, throwing up all day."

"WE JUST CAME OUT AND DID WHAT WE DO, WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING," SAID MILLER. "IT'S NOTHING NEW NOW."

As Denver's offense sputtered, Webster had plenty of chances to make his mark, but it would be unfair to heap all the blame on Manning's arm. Drops plagued the Broncos throughout the first half. They let six throws slip through their hands, and no one was immune. Anderson botched a third-down angle route that would've been a sure first down. Receiver Emmanuel Sanders couldn't hold onto the ball after a big hit on a fourth down late in the first half. And receiver Bennie Fowler had a pair of drops that stalled a series following a shanked Steelers punt.

Fowler would eventually get his redemption in the fourth quarter, when he took a short Manning throw and avoided three tacklers on his way to a 31-yard gain. It was one of only three Denver passes that gained more than 15 yards. One of the others came on a bizarre play typical of this Broncos season. Sensing pressure to his left, Manning instinctively ducked to the ground, knees first. When no one touched him, the quarterback hopped to his feet and found Sanders for a gain of 34. Nothing came of that drive, but the sequence, to Manning's chagrin, was still a topic of conversation after the game. "I really don't want to analyze this play too much," Manning said, only half-jokingly. "I'd kind of like it to go away, if it could."

The same might be said for much of Manning's season. Even before a foot injury sent him to the sideline after Week 10, his decline from the quarterback we once knew had been precipitous. Manning finished the season with 17 interceptions, second most in the league, and he did it while missing six games. His interception rate of 5.1% tied that of Arizona's John Skelton in 2011 for the worst season mark in the past five years. In the 17th matchup of arguably the two greatest quarterbacks of all time, this will be the first time when the level of Brady's play clearly outclasses Manning's.

As they roll into Denver this week, the Patriots are as well positioned offensively as they have been at any point during the second half of the season. Their line is as healthy as it can be with offensive tackle Nate Solder gone for the year. Receiver Julian Edelman is back. And although tight end Rob Gronkowski is hurting, it didn't seem to matter against the Chiefs. Seventeen of Brady's 28 completions went to Edelman and Gronkowski, and the results were a reminder of what kind of offense the Patriots can muster with an arsenal that's close to full.

Gronkowski is obviously any opposing team's focus, but slowing Edelman might pose an even bigger challenge for the Broncos. Harris, a wizard at slot cornerback, was limited to a smattering of snaps against Pittsburgh as he continued to deal with a left-shoulder injury suffered in the season finale. He ceded his role in Denver's base defense to Roby. "I just wasn't myself," Harris admitted. "It's hard for me to do the things that I do."

Against a Pittsburgh offense that was missing Brown, the Broncos survived with a Pro Bowl cornerback on the sideline. Against Edelman and the Patriots, that may not work out as well. One sore shoulder could mean the difference between a trip home and a trip to the Super Bowl. When you win the way the Broncos do these days, it's life on the edge of a knife.

TAKE A KNEE
Bryant, here being leveled by Marshall (54) and Talib (21), had nine catches for 154 yards but could not find his way into the end zone.

GREATS RARELY walk away gracefully. The maniacal effort needed to reach and stay at the highest echelon often has a wearing effect late in careers. It can't be easy for Manning to come to terms with the current version of his game, and at times after the final whistle on Sunday, the fatigue was plain in his voice. "We stayed patient," Manning said. "We didn't get frustrated. It served us well tonight, and it served us well during the season."

That's where the Broncos' offense is now. The mind-set has turned from burning down defenses to powering through Denver's own struggles. Manning's body has betrayed him, turning him into a different kind of asset. Pittsburgh linebacker James Harrison said it best in the locker room on Sunday night: Manning's value to the Broncos is "all above the neck." Denver's offense still trusts Manning to call the right play, even if at times he struggles to follow through.

The comfort in that will have to be enough against the Patriots. Manning versus Brady is more familiar than anything else in the NFL, but this time the formula on one side will be drastically different from what we've known for so long. It's a formula that can be potent in its own right. As Denver's offensive line has coalesced down the stretch, the version of Anderson that the world met late last season has started to reemerge, and no defense in the league is more capable than the Broncos'.

In describing the game against the Steelers, Manning said his team "did just enough to win." For the Broncos, it's now a matter of doing that two more times. □

ROUGHED UP
Hounded from all sides, Brady was knocked off his game. He was sacked four times and threw two interceptions in 56 attempts.

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
February 1, 2016

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP

IT STARTS WITH D

The Broncos got back to the Super Bowl by changing the script. The new plot points: A coach who won't quit, a near perfect punter . . . and that pressure-cooker defense

BY GREG BISHOP

Photographs by
DONALD MIRALLE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

AS BEDLAM broke out around him, Von Miller needed to sit down. He wanted a respite after a defensive performance that ranked among the greatest in playoff history, after an AFC championship game that remained in doubt until the final seconds, after an old Peyton Manning had become the old Peyton Manning once again.

The Broncos' sack savant settled into a chair in the corner of his locker room on Sunday night, away from the discarded confetti, away from teammates shouting at the TV cameras, away from rapper T.I. Miller in his white designer sneakers and oversized Sally Jessy Raphael glasses and two diamond-studded gold chains. Miller had grand plans for the evening: a party with teammates in his 3,800-square-foot basement, which he calls Club 58, after his jersey number—a man cave with eight TVs, a projection screen, a pool table, a Pop-A-Shot machine and bar stools sturdy enough to support 350-pound linemen. Miller had even grander plans for two weeks hence: a date with the Panthers in Super Bowl 50.

For the previous four hours Miller, an outside linebacker, and the Broncos' defense had terrorized the Patriots, combining for four sacks and 20 quarterback hits (the most by any team this season) while intercepting Tom Brady twice. Cornerback Bradley Roby had snagged Brady's tipped pass on a two-point-

conversion attempt with 12 seconds remaining to cement Denver's 20–18 triumph. Linebacker DeMarcus Ware, Miller's idol and the other half of the best pass-rush tandem in football, had secured the first Super Bowl appearance of his 11-year career.

Now Miller needed a moment. He needed time to process the run that had started when the Broncos installed their legendary QB, John Elway, as vice president in 2011. He needed to reflect on how Elway had made Miller his first draft pick. And how Elway had stuck with the 39-year-old Manning throughout an abysmal season, allowing him to become the oldest passer in football history to take a team to the Super Bowl. The previous oldest? Elway, in 1999, at 38. "I just knew," Miller said. "All week I felt so confident—I knew we were going to win."

Count Miller in the minority. Few had predicted a Denver victory. Fewer predicted how it would happen. The buildup, with its approximately 8,934 infographics, focused on Brady-Manning XVII, on the rivalry that never seems to end. But Manning's Last Stand—his "John Wayne moment," as retired quarterback Trent Dilfer put it—was in the end defined by a former quarterback who 13 years ago converted to tight end; a cornerback who played with a bum shoulder; a punter who might have been the most valuable Bronco on the day; and a silver-haired defensive coordinator who drew up an epic game plan at the ripe old age of 68.

"That," Miller said, "has kind of been our season."

THE PATRIOTS won the coin toss and elected to receive. That was the first unexpected thing that happened Sunday. The decision reflected a confidence in their game plan, a desire to vault to an early lead and force the plodding Broncos and their ancient QB to throw.

Except that Manning did throw. After the Broncos stopped the Patriots' opening drive, Manning's passes led Denver down the field, and on second-and-11 from New England's 21 he found tight end Owen Daniels, who'd spent one season at Wisconsin playing QB, in blown coverage against a linebacker. Touchdown.

The second unexpected thing that happened on Sunday was a one-yard first-quarter TD plunge by Patriots running back Steven Jackson—the same Jackson who, plucked from his couch one month ago, made $114,117 this season (or about what Brady might command for a speaking engagement). Even more unexpected (and ultimately far more important) was what followed: a missed extra point by Stephen Gostkowski, one of the most accurate kickers in NFL history. And then a fourth surprise: Early in the second quarter Brady, who threw only seven picks in the regular season, forced a pass in the direction of tight end Rob Gronkowski. Miller intercepted and returned it to New England's 16. Three plays later Manning again found Daniels, for a 12-yard score that put Denver up 14–6.

At halftime New England coach Bill Belichick swapped his blue pullover for the trademark gray hoodie. For luck, or maybe because of a nacho stain—we'll never know. But the costume change seemed to augur another Patriots comeback. As in, say, last season's Super Bowl victory.

It never materialized. The Broncos chased Brady as if Queen and David Bowie (RIP) were singing "Under Pressure" into the QB's helmet. Punter Britton Colquitt kept the Patriots pinned back with nine punts that averaged a hearty 47.0 yards, four of which dropped inside New England's 20.

THE BRONCOS CHASED BRADY AS IF **QUEEN AND DAVID BOWIE WERE SINGING "UNDER PRESSURE" INTO THE QB'S HELMET.**

CATCHING ON
The unblockable Miller (left, 58) came up with 2½ sacks and one interception, while Daniels (above, 81), who's played in Kubiak's system for most of his career, hauled in two touchdown passes.

Brandon McManus's 31-yard field goal extended Denver's lead to 20–12 with 10:02 remaining—and still it seemed perfectly reasonable for some Brady mojo to remain. Twice in the final 10 minutes the Patriots' QB drove inside the Broncos' 20-yard line. And twice the Broncos held on fourth down. The first time came when cornerback Chris Harris, playing essentially with one arm because of a bum left shoulder, dragged down receiver Julian Edelman short of the marker. The second came on an incompletion, as Brady threw under duress.

Even then the Patriots mounted one final drive. (It helped that Manning and his offense did so little in their last two possessions: six plays, three yards gained and two punts.) On another fourth down—10 yards to go from the 50-yard line, with 1:34 left—Brady connected with Gronkowski for 40 yards. On yet another fourth down Brady lobbed a prayer that Gronkowski corralled for six points after knocking Harris out of the way.

The two-point conversion failed. So did the onside kick, recovered by safety Shiloh Keo, who leaped into the stands. Confetti showered the field. Edelman limped off. Gostkowski blamed himself for his early missed kick, the decisive point: "I feel like I lost the game."

Wade Phillips? He was just lost. Shortly after the last whistle, for reasons unknown, Denver's sexagenarian defensive coordinator retreated to the Broncos' locker room, nearly missing the championship ceremony that he'd made possible. (A team employee finally fetched him.) Phillips's game plan had seemed inspired by the blueprint used by Rex Ryan's Jets to knock the Patriots from the 2011 playoffs: employ six defensive backs, flooding the middle of the field with defenders; play as much man as possible, doubling Gronkowski and Edelman at every opportunity; and, above all, change where the pressure is coming from, play by play. For an offense like the Patriots', which changes as much as any other from week to week, things can fall apart when they see something unexpected on D. It helps, too, that Miller and Ware feasted on a depleted O-line. "That was the most impressive defensive performance for the Broncos I've ever seen," said Shannon Sharpe, Denver's Hall of Fame tight end.

In the end Phillips walked back onto the field wearing only a long-sleeve T-shirt. It was his Bud Grant moment.

OLD? MANNING dropped back on a third-and-10 in the third quarter on Sunday, saw his receivers covered and rumbled off right tackle like a giraffe on ice skates. Twelve yards and a first down. Old? "He was trucking," left tackle Ryan Harris said, laughing.

Meanwhile, Brett Favre watched from his 465-acre farm in Mississippi. Favre had heard Manning say all week that he wasn't thinking too far into the future. But Favre knew

better. He starred in this same movie with the Vikings in 2009, advancing to the NFC title game. (He lost.) "You say you're not thinking about the end," said Favre, on his way to hunt deer. "But it consumes you. You know it's unlikely you'll ever get that chance again."

For Favre, to watch Manning this year was to see another actor channeling his performance in a remake of *The End*—only Manning's drop in velocity was more drastic because he never had Favre's arm strength. Favre heard Manning say that this year was different from the 16 before it because of his 17 interceptions in nine weeks, because of the tear in the plantar fascia near his left heel that shelved him for six games. Manning had looked, Favre said, "sort of un-Peyton-like."

Across the city that adopted Manning when he arrived in 2012, the older and the headed-that-way, those forced like Favre to confront retirement, were compelled to consider what's next. They watched Manning and saw themselves. "The fact is, we're all aging," said Amanda Gregg, director of the downtown Office of Aging, a sort of counseling center for senior citizens. That office exists, Gregg says, so that we might see advancing age as less of a negative, more of a benefit. After the Broncos beat the Steelers a week earlier, Chris Harris had called Manning a "game manager." That could be viewed as a drawback—or, on Sunday, an asset.

FAVRE KNEW BETTER. "YOU SAY YOU'RE NOT THINKING ABOUT THE END," HE SAID OF MANNING, "BUT IT CONSUMES YOU."

All of Denver, it seemed, could relate to Manning's hanging on. People like Brian Young, who danced professionally all over the world, through his prime and into his 30s. Now 35 and

PATS OFF
Denver's secondary—especially Talib-neutralized Edelman (11), who had 53 yards and no touchdowns. Meanwhile Manning (far right, with Brady) had two TDs and no INTs.

JEFF HAYNES FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

running a Denver studio, Young can sympathize with the QB. For years Young could easily spring out of bed and bend his body in half, contorting like a pretzel. Now? Only on a good day, after an extensive warmup. His body aches from his toes to his shoulders. That can be depressing. "It's not that you can't continue to do what you love," he says. "It's that the joy starts coming out of it. There are days where I'm still strong and locked in—just fewer of them. There are other days where I'm like, *Jesus, I just can't do this anymore*."

Manning had plenty of those days this season, sprinkled with a few joyful afternoons like Sunday. "As we get older, some of our abilities leave us," Sharpe said. "We can't run as fast, can't jump as far. But we don't forget what it is that we know how to do."

Amen, Manning might have said as the Brady-Manning narrative shifted yet again. Here Manning had won a third straight playoff meeting with his nemesis. He improved to 4–1 in conference championship games and advanced to a fourth Super Bowl. His counterpart in two weeks, Cam Newton, was nine years old when Manning entered the NFL, in 1998.

THE BRONCOS did not win football games this year so much as survive them. They went 11–3 in contests decided by seven points or fewer, including Sunday's victory; no team in NFL history won so many nail-biters. Of course they would prefer that outsiders focus on the fact that they won, rather than the how of it. "I've never had a season like this," said Ryan Harris, "but I don't look at it as weakness. I think it speaks to our resolve."

Denver's 2015 campaign unfolded with more dramatics than a season of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. There was the Manning or Brock Osweiler quarterback debate; Manning's injury in November; the (denied) HGH allegation lobbed at him by Al Jazeera in December; and a secondary that limped down the stretch. Yet there the Broncos were, winning three overtime thrillers, becoming the first team to overcome 14-point deficits against three opponents that would make the playoffs.

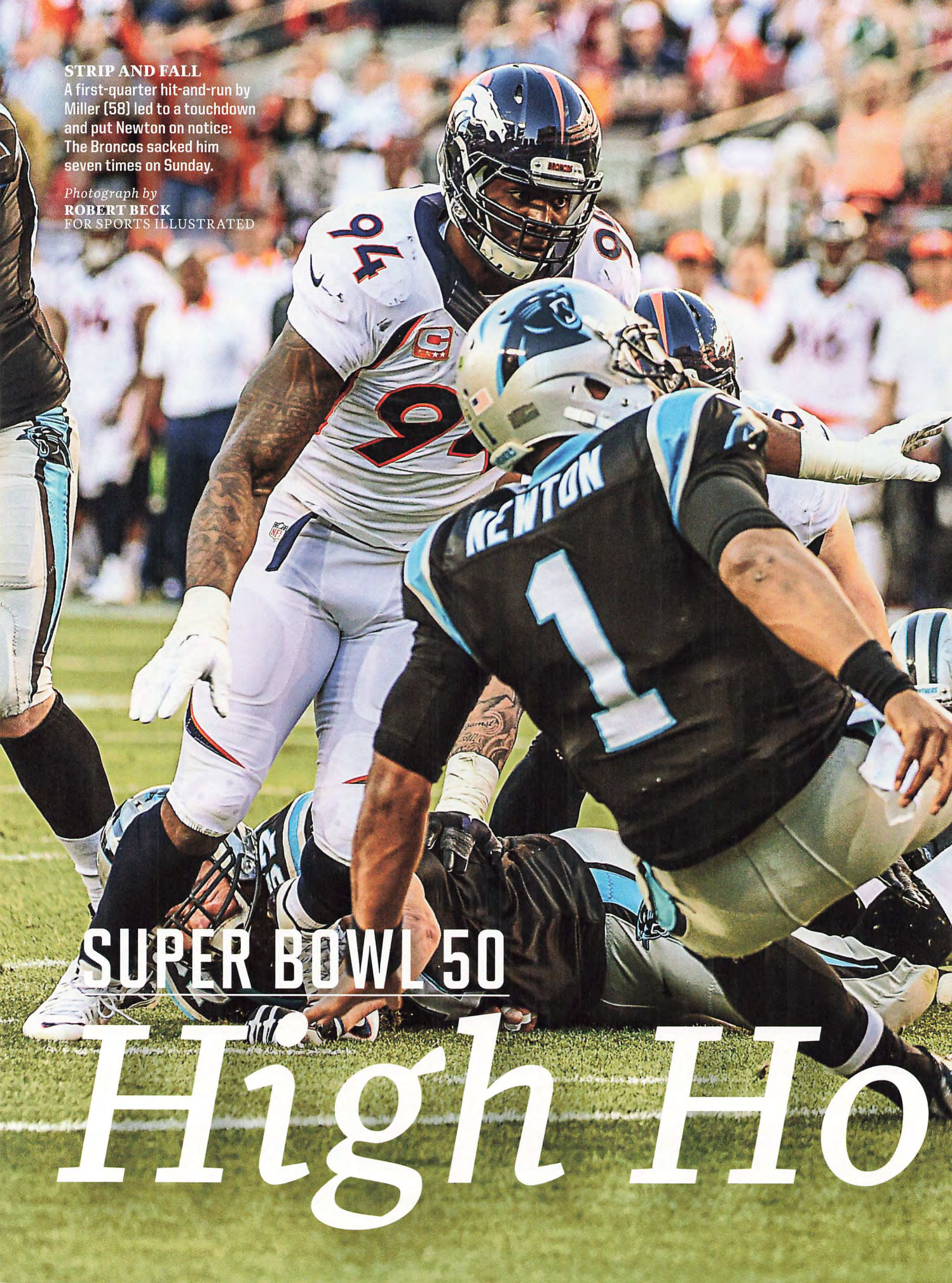
On Sunday, Denver never trailed. But easy this was not. "This is a great example of what this entire season has been like," Manning said at the podium as his son, Marshall, hid behind him like a shy tailback. "[There have] been a lot of different people stepping up at different times—starters, nonstarters becoming starters. Everybody did their part."

That seasonlong resiliency validated the decision Elway made after his Broncos got bounced by the Colts in the playoffs a year ago. He fired coach John Fox after that game not because Denver lost—he fired Fox because of how lifeless his team looked in doing so. Elway said he wanted players who were "kicking and screaming" until the end. Then he

hired an old friend, Gary Kubiak, once his backup with the Broncos and then his offensive coordinator. Kubiak had won three rings as an assistant. He kicked. He screamed. And on Sunday he became the seventh coach in NFL history to lead a team to the Super Bowl in his first season with that franchise.

The last time the Broncos reached this cusp, two years ago, they had one of the most prolific offenses in NFL history—and then they fell 35 points short in a Super Bowl beatdown at the hands of the Seahawks. (That Denver D: No. 22 in points, No. 19 in yards.) But on Sunday, Colquitt pointed to the way his team had evolved this season, away from Manning, bolstered by that ferocious D, forged by close games, more balanced and more tested. "We're more three-sided now," he said.

Half an hour later Miller walked out of the stadium through the tunnel, eyes locked on his iPhone. Sunday would mark this season's final night of Club 58, and while he didn't plan to open shop in Santa Clara, he did hope to add some flair to the club's ambience next season. Perhaps a replica Lombardi Trophy. □



STRIP AND FALL
A first-quarter hit-and-run by Miller (58) led to a touchdown and put Newton on notice: The Broncos sacked him seven times on Sunday.

Photograph by
ROBERT BECK
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

SUPER BOWL 50

High Ho

rses

Von Miller and the Broncos' defense tore up Cam Newton's dance card, dismantled the Panthers piece by piece and painted a perfect orange sunset for their iconic quarterback

BY CHRIS BURKE

THIS WAS all about Peyton Manning. And it wasn't.

In what may have been his last NFL game, Manning won his second Super Bowl title—one with Indianapolis and now one with Denver. The Broncos' 24–10 victory over the Panthers in Super Bowl 50, though, was sparked not by their quarterback but by their defense—a swarming, remarkable unit that finished the regular season ranked No. 1 and finished the postseason by suffocating the NFL's top-scoring offense and its MVP quarterback.

Carolina's Cam Newton had dabbed and danced his way through 18 games, slowed only by a single loss, to the Falcons in Week 16. There would be no showcase in Santa Clara. On the Panthers' second possession, linebacker Von Miller, the game's MVP, flew around right tackle Mike Remmers and ripped the ball from Newton's grasp. Malik Jackson pounced on it in the end zone, handing Denver a 10–0 lead. The beginning of the end.

Super Bowl 50 was to be a coronation of Newton, the NFL's brightest star. Instead, it served as another reminder—as Denver found out two years earlier when it ran into a Seahawks buzz saw—that, yes, defense still wins championships. "I watched the film all week. [Carolina] did not play anybody on defense that played like us," Denver cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said in the locker room. "We went [Tom] Brady twice, Big Ben [Roethlisberger] twice, Cam Newton, how could you not say we're one of the greatest defenses of all time?" The 1975 Steelers, the '85 Bears, the 2000 Ravens, those 2013 Seahawks and others are in the conversation, but few, if any, could have put the clamps on Newton and Co., the way the Broncos did.

If the strip-sack by Miller started the onslaught, his second forced fumble essentially finished it. Carolina trailed by only six late in the fourth quarter when Miller again torched Remmers and knocked the ball from Newton's grasp. Rather than dive into a pile after the

UNDER FIRE
Miller (58) and Ward (43) sandwiched Newton on one of the QB's few scrambles. Manning (right) faced heat too (five sacks), but his line gave him time to complete 13 passes for 141 yards.

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)

BRONCOS
18
BRONCOS
18
SUPER BOWL
61
MATHIS

loose ball, Newton inexplicably pulled up. The ball rolled inside the Carolina five-yard line, where safety T.J. Ward pounced on it. "He was done, man. He was done," Harris said of Newton. "We were too aggressive. He was tired of getting hit."

Running back C.J. Anderson powered across the goal line to ice the win a few plays after Newton's second fumble. The score kept Denver from becoming the first Super Bowl champion to win without an offensive touchdown, and perhaps that would have been fitting. The Broncos' offense had mustered only nine points before Anderson's touchdown, three times reaching the red zone and settling for field goals.

The Denver offense had come out strong, with Manning converting on three of four passes to open the game. But then he faded. He even helped keep Carolina alive with a second-quarter interception thrown to defensive end Kony Ealy; he propped the door open again by fumbling near midfield with 13:17 left in the game.

ON A THIRD-AND-NINE, KUBIAK ORDERED A RUN. THE MESSAGE WAS SIMPLE: THE DEFENSE CAN WIN IT.

Eventually the Broncos took the game out of Manning's hands. On a third-and-nine on his own 26-yard line with 5:42 left and Denver clinging to a six-point lead, coach Gary Kubiak ordered a handoff. The message was simple: The defense can win it, so long as the offense doesn't lose it.

THE BRONCOS talked all week about their offense's potential, and Manning's remaining capabilities, but at times it became clear that they knew it would take more than Manning to win on Sunday. On Feb. 1 tight end Owen Daniels let this slip: "You haven't seen us light up the scoreboard offensively. It's been all team wins, all grind-it-out type of wins. I feel like it will be another one of those type of games."

Of course, this Broncos victory stirs memories of their previous two titles, when the team had to play through the twilight of an iconic quarterback. Until Denver broke through in Super Bowl XXXII, questions swirled about John Elway's ability to win the big game. But the Broncos beat the Packers in that Super Bowl and returned the next year against the Falcons, when Elway—at age 38, one year younger than Manning

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)

ONE TITLE TO GO
Roby (left) and the defense under Phillips (right) are champions, but they remain one catchy moniker from being a unit for the ages.

is now—was named the game's MVP.

Both Elway and Manning will tell anyone who listens that how you get the job done is not as important as simply getting the job done. Manning said he wanted "to win for [defensive coordinator] Wade Phillips, for [quarterbacks coach] Greg Knapp, guys who had been coaching for a long time and never had a chance to be a part of [winning] one. I think that was kind of a great example of what this team has been about: unselfish, tough, resilient. That's what our team's been. That's what I've been."

Manning was one of the last Broncos to leave the locker room on Sunday night. When he finally stood up, he walked out slowly, stopping to shake hands with several people. Still dressing were Miller, Harris and cornerbacks Aqib Talib and Bradley Roby. Without them, Manning's Sunday-night exit could have been much different. "All week they talked about how we can't stop Carolina," Harris shouted to no one in particular, as his teammates conducted interviews around him. "They talking about [Ted] Ginn. [Jerricho] Cotchery. Who are these guys?"

The Carolina receivers had been viewed as a weakness since the preseason, when projected No. 1 option Kelvin Benjamin tore his left ACL. However, his absence turned into just a temporary setback, as Newton—as well as Carolina's own stellar defense—paced the NFC champs to a 15–1 regular season.

But the Panthers' receivers found almost no room against Denver. Two of their rare big plays came on a leaping 24-yard grab by Devin Funchess with Roby draped all over him and an acrobatic 42-yard reception by Corey (Philly) Brown between two defenders. Otherwise, Newton found little space to throw into and not much time to look.

Miller dropped him for 2½ sacks, while his pass-rushing compatriot, defensive end DeMarcus Ware, tallied two

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PHILLIPS)

DONALD MIRALLE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

HIDDEN CAM
After leading the NFL's top-scoring offense, the league MVP went 18 of 41 for 265 yards with one interception and two costly fumbles in his first Super Bowl.

more sacks. Harris and Darian Stewart each added a sack; Derek Wolfe pitched in half of one. That makes a total of seven sacks, and Newton was hurried and hit numerous other times. "They just played better than us," a contrite—some might say petulant—Newton offered after the game. "I don't know what you want me to say? They made more plays than us, and that's what it came down to. We dropped balls. We turned the ball over, gave up sacks, threw errant passes. That's it. They scored more points than we did."

Panthers coach Ron Rivera was more complimentary, especially of Miller, an impending free agent: "He played a heck of a football game. . . . He deserves to be the Super Bowl MVP."

DENVER'S DEFENDERS made clear during Super Bowl week that they wanted to limit Carolina's running game, thereby forcing Newton into must-throw spots. They reiterated that plan with gusto in the aftermath of their remarkable night, with several members of the secondary noting that they believed that they could get into Newton's head. Making his Super Bowl debut, Newton came out jittery—he airmailed his first throw, to Brown, and misfired several simple tosses after that. Save for a pair of second-quarter scrambles, he also uncovered few opportunities to run.

The Broncos pinned him in the pocket, bringing heat from

"EVERYBODY WAS SHARP," WARD SAID. "AND WE EXECUTED. IT'S ONE THING TO HAVE A PLAN, IT'S ANOTHER TO EXECUTE."

all angles. Said Ward of his pass-rushing teammates, "They made life easier for us all season, so we knew they'd be on it this game. Everybody was sharp, and we expected to be sharp because it's the championship. And we executed. It's one thing to have a plan, it's another to execute it."

Carolina had jumped out to massive leads in its first two playoff games: 31–0 over the Seahawks (en route to a 31–24 win) and 34–7 on Arizona in an NFC championship laugher. They never pulled out in front of Denver. The Broncos took the opening kickoff and marched 64 yards before settling

for a Brandon McManus field goal. After a three-and-out by each team, Denver's defense got its touchdown.

Jonathan Stewart responded with the Panthers' lone touchdown, capping a drive that showed off Newton's strengths as he rushed twice for 23 yards and completed four passes for 51 yards. The Panthers never reached the red zone again.

They came close in the third quarter. On a second-and-10 from Denver's 28-yard line, Newton zipped a pass that ricocheted off Ginn's hands and into Ward's. He fumbled on his runback, but the ball was recovered by teammate Danny Trevathan. "I owe him more than a beer," Ward said. After spotting Trevathan across the locker room, he added, "Hey, Danny! I got you!"

Carolina's most effective drives resulted in two Graham Gano field goal tries (one missed, one made) and a two-minute drill before halftime that died when Ware sacked Newton near midfield. "It wasn't really anything different that we had to change, just go out there and be us and it worked for us," Miller said an hour after the game, sweat still dripping down his forehead. "We've had great energy since we traveled here. Last week in practice was great, and it carried over into the game."

Miller's first stop when he made it to the locker room had been to visit Annabel Bowlen, wife of Pat Bowlen, the team owner who has been incapacitated by Alzheimer's.

RUSH AND GUSH Anderson (22) ran for 90 yards and a touchdown on 23 carries, enough to power the offense and allow Miller (58) to celebrate on his own and with Kubiak (top right).

Annabel earlier had accepted the Vince Lombardi Trophy, then handed it to Elway, who shouted, "This one's for Pat!" She repeated the phrase as she held the trophy, just before Miller found her. When he joined her, he shouted the same phrase.

ELWAY DESERVES most of the credit for building the roster. He took over as executive vice president and GM in early 2011, then used his first available draft pick on Miller, one spot after Carolina nabbed Newton with the top choice. Wolfe, Jackson, Sylvester Williams, Shane Ray and Roby were all among those Denver took in subsequent drafts. Elway also pounced on Ware in March 2014, signing him after he was released by Dallas.

This season the Broncos handed all of those pieces over to Kubiak, who was fired by the Texans late in the 2013 campaign. Kubiak eventually brought Phillips with him, and the veteran defensive coordinator unleashed brilliant game plans in the playoffs—on Brady in the AFC title game and on Newton in the Super Bowl. The Broncos' defense can now stake its claim as among the best ever. "Without a doubt, with how we played today," Elway said.

Meanwhile, Manning's place in NFL history is even more secure. The latest win was his 200th, and he became the first quarterback to take different franchises to multiple Super Bowls. He already held the career records for passing yards and passing touchdowns. If this is indeed the end of the line for Manning, the Super Bowl 50 win allows him to bask in his accomplishments rather than wonder if he had held his team back. After the game he did not seem to mind one bit that his final line was uninspiring: 13 of 23, 141 yards, an interception and a lost fumble. (Both turnovers were caused by Ealy, who also notched three sacks.) "I'm very proud of it. I am very proud of it," Manning said of the win, still wearing his Super Bowl champions hat and T-shirt. "I'm honored and grateful that I've had a chance to win a championship with two separate organizations. There's a bond you'll have with those teammates and those coaches."

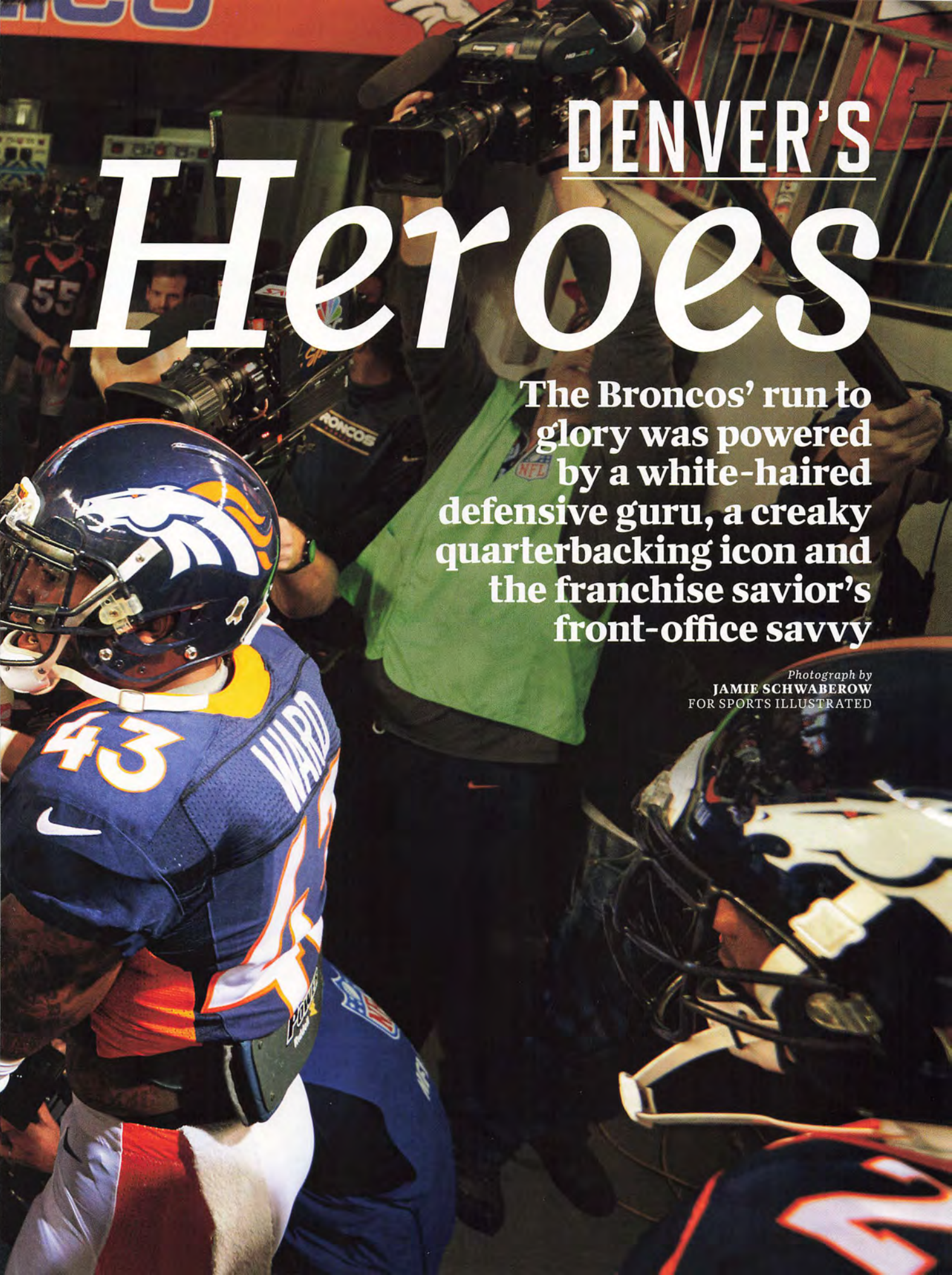
Denver didn't need Manning to be great on Sunday. It didn't even need him to be all that good, really. The defense did the heavy lifting, led by the dynamic duo of Miller and Ware, plus a secondary that vacuumed up any room Carolina might have found downfield.

The NFL named Newton its regular-season Most Valuable Player on Saturday night. Twenty-four hours later he was but a shell of the quarterback he had been all year. "Did y'all see him dance today?" Harris asked. "He didn't dance. He saw us dance."

Who wouldn't celebrate a little extra after a game like that? Another championship for the Broncos. Maybe a ride into the sunset for Manning. And an unforgettable performance by an unbeatable defense. □

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ANDERSON); ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GATORADE); AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MILLER)

HORSE WHISPERS
Safety T.J. Ward got Denver's defense focused before taking the field against the Packers in early November.



DENVER'S Heroes

The Broncos' run to glory was powered by a white-haired defensive guru, a creaky quarterbacking icon and the franchise savior's front-office savvy

Photograph by
JAMIE SCHWABEROW
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

BRONCS, CHEER! Denver hasn't seen a D this stingy since the Orange Crush: The Broncos' 6.4 scrimmage yards allowed per touch are a 37-year team low.

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
November 30, 2015

SIMPLE PLEASURES

The players look familiar, but this is not the same Broncos defense: Wade Phillips has turned a talented group into the NFL's scariest unit with his trusty (and well-traveled) point-and-shoot scheme. Take note, Tom Brady—Denver is ready to bring the plain

BY GREG A. BEDARD

Photograph by
DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

BY THE time you read this, you will no doubt have heard a week's worth of questioning and armchair quarterbacking about Sunday's regular-season showdown between the Patriots and the Broncos in Denver. *Why isn't Peyton Manning facing Tom Brady for a 17th time? Is Manning really hurt? Or is it just his pride that's reeling? Are his rib and foot injuries merely giving coach Gary Kubiak cover to go with the quarterback, Brock Osweiler, who can best run his offense?*

In reality, Kubiak probably doesn't much care which QB starts. He knows that the identity of his team comes from coordinator Wade Phillips's relentless defense. Denver has been so good on that side of the ball this season—eight of 10 opposing QBs have been held to a single passing TD or less; in only one game has a foe rushed for multiple TDs—that it might not matter which QB Kubiak sends out.

If you've followed Phillips's long and winding career—earning his master's degree in football from his legendary father, Bum; crossing paths with some of the game's greatest minds, from Bear Bryant to Bill Yeoman—this should come as no surprise. The proud East Texas native may appear to have just fallen off the turnip truck (the aw-shucks attitude and lingering twang, the biscuits-and-gravy physique and tussled, snow-white hair), but that belies the truth, that he is one of the NFL's top defensive coaches.

Phillips's track record speaks for itself. Since leaving the Eagles (where for three years he coordinated Buddy Ryan's defense) after the 1988 season, he has instantly improved every unit he's coached in terms of points and yards allowed. Whether it was the Broncos the first time around ('89–94), the Bills ('95–2000), the Falcons ('02–03), the Chargers ('04–06), the Cowboys ('07–10), the Texans ('11–13) or now Denver again, Phillips has been the man for any team in need of a quick fix.

"Wade does a great job of instilling confidence in his players," says Patrick Kerney, a retired All-Pro defensive end who blossomed under Phillips's guidance in Atlanta. "This stems less from his great track record [nine times his defenses have ranked in the top five in yards allowed] than from his ability to project a sincere belief in his guys. We couldn't help but want to go out there every day and work to validate his opinion of us."

And the fact is, these Broncos needed a change on defense, even if that wasn't immediately apparent. Denver's coordinator over the past three years, Jack Del Rio (whom the Raiders hired as their coach in the off-season), employed a scheme that worked just fine, especially when buttressed by an explosive offense. And he got results: Denver was No. 3 in yards allowed last season, No. 16 in points. But Del Rio's defense lacked imagination and, more important, came up short against the best quarterbacks, including Brady. In nine games with Denver and Jacksonville (where he was previously the head coach), Del Rio beat Brady only once. And that victory came in the AFC championship game following the 2013 season, in which Manning led the highest-scoring offense of the modern era and Brady made do with tight ends like Matthew Mulligan and Michael Hoomanawanui.

Phillips's track record against Brady (1–5) isn't much better than Del Rio's, but to be fair, it would look healthier had the Chargers' Marlon McCree not fumbled away a late fourth-down interception that should have buried the Pats in the 2006 divisional playoffs. On the other hand, Phillips has never battled Brady with a defense as strong as the Broncos' on all three levels. Up front, Denver brings twin-terror pass rushers Von Miller and

PHILLIPS'S RECORD SPEAKS FOR ITSELF. SINCE LEAVING THE EAGLES, HE HAS IMPROVED EVERY UNIT HE HAS COACHED IN TERMS OF POINTS AND YARDS ALLOWED.

ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

UPPER LEVELS
Miller (58) leads a killer rush, backed by speedy linebackers such as Marshall (54) and hard-hitting defensive backs such as Ward (43).

DeMarcus Ware, who have combined for 12½ sacks (that despite Ware's two-game absence for a back problem). They are aided inside by linemen Malik Jackson, Sylvester Williams and Antonio Smith (nine combined sacks). Brandon Marshall and Danny Trevathan are excellent run-and-hit linebackers, and strong safety T.J. Ward is a physical playmaker. In back there may not be a better corner duo in the NFL than Aqib Talib and Chris Harris Jr., who have turned their in-your-face man coverage into three pick-sixes. Second-year nickelback Bradley Roby has the look of a future No. 1 press corner, and David Bruton is an underrated do-everything defensive back.

"We believe we have the mix to compete with anybody in this league," says Marshall. "That's where [Phillips has] our confidence level."

And that shows on paper. Through Sunday the Broncos ranked first in the NFL in total defense (284.3 yards per game), pass defense (190.6), points allowed (18.3) and total sacks (34); second in opposing passer rating (74.2); and seventh in rushing defense (93.7). Now imagine how that might look if Denver's offense weren't tied for 25th in the league with 1.9 giveaways per game and weren't rated dead last in Football Outsiders' formula, which factors in opponent and league averages.

In short, the Broncos' defense has been playing with an offensive piano strapped to its back this season. And still it has flourished.

Here's another thing: Phillips has made that happen with nearly the same personnel Del Rio had. "The same players," says Marshall. "You look at [how the] stats jumped. . . . I think that's a testament to Wade."

THE DIFFERENCES between Del Rio's scheme and Phillips's approach are fairly simple. For the most part, Del Rio ran a two-gap, 4–3/3–4 hybrid predicated on linemen occupying blockers by playing the gaps on either side of them, especially on early downs. Coverages varied, but there wasn't a lot of the press-man that today's defenses use to thwart precision passers, and there was hardly any blitzing. According to Pro Football Focus, the Broncos ranked 26th in the league last year in blitz percentage (22.8).

By contrast, Phillips employs a 3–4, one-gap system, which allows players to be aggressive and penetrate holes. He also sends an extra rusher about 40% of the time, fourth-most in the NFL. Phillips is not afraid to put Talib and Harris in bump-and-run coverage all over the field.

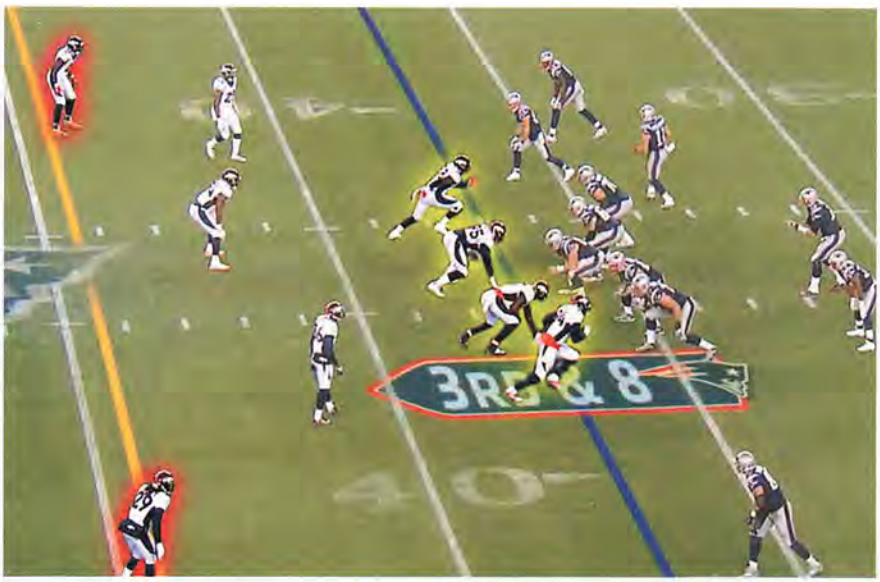
The beauty in Phillips's scheme—and the reason his units have rapid success with it—is that it isn't very complicated. Players don't have to think as much as they did under Del Rio, and they can play faster. "[Today's] offenses are so complicated, it's amazing," says Phillips. "If you try to match that as a defense, you're going to get confused. I've always thought: If a guy thinks [his task] is easy to do, he will play better."

"Wade uses his guys' abilities more than he's looking to outscheme a team," says Ware, who knows his coach better than anyone on the Broncos' defense after playing for him in Dallas for four years. "He's more about man-on-man—*this is what we're doing; these are the checks we need to make*. Mentally, that makes things a lot more simple. From a physical standpoint it allows you to key on tendencies and what the opponent is doing. It brings out more of the killer instinct in a guy."

It also tends to make opposing QBs feel as if they're under constant pressure, and that should be particularly helpful against Brady on Sunday. In Week 9 against the Patriots last year, the Broncos fell behind 27–7 but had a chance to make things interesting in the second half when Denver's first drive cut the deficit to 13. A third-and-eight play with 9:52 left in the third quarter, however, illustrates why Del Rio's scheme had a hard time succeeding against a cerebral quarterback such as Brady.

With the Patriots in trips right, the Broncos gave a zone look with two deep safeties. Each of the cornerbacks was between five and seven yards off his receiver. On the snap Denver rushed its usual four linemen and moved into a Cover 3 zone, with the two outside corners and the free safety playing conservatively deep on top of the receivers. Brady easily identified the coverage,

DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PHILLIPS); NFL GAME PASS (2)



WADE'S WORLD
The difference between Phillips (whose Houston D took on Brady in 2013, far left) and his predecessor, Del Rio (whose unit conceded a big catch to Amendola in '14, near left): Phillips is more likely to go after the QB and press the Pats' WRs at the line. Del Rio was inclined to sit back and scheme.

Pass Rushers *Cornerbacks*

DENVER'S D HAS BEEN PLAYING WITH AN OFFENSIVE PIANO STRAPPED TO ITS BACK: 25TH IN GIVEAWAYS AND RATED DEAD LAST BY FOOTBALL OUTSIDERS.

scrambled to his right and hit Danny Amendola in a huge void between four defenders. That was good for 21 yards and a first down en route to a field goal that stretched the lead back to 16.

Phillips will not make life that easy for Brady. The last time Phillips faced the Patriots was with Houston during the 2013 season, when despite being in the middle of a 14-game losing streak that would get him and his coach (Kubiak) fired, the Texans barely lost, 34–31. With New England facing third-and-two on Houston's 35-yard line with 3:20 remaining and the score tied, the Texans had four defenders standing within four yards of the line of scrimmage and two down linemen. They played press-man coverage against the two slot receivers and played off-man coverage on the outside, with one deep safety. At the snap Phillips sent an extra rusher to force Brady into a quick decision. With man coverage against every receiver, Brady threw a near perfect pass to tight end Rob Gronkowski, but it was broken up by Brandon Harris, who was playing aggressively as a linebacker in Houston's sub package.

Del Rio played Brady conservatively. Phillips pressed the issue and made the quarterback speed up. "I love Del Rio because he gave me my first opportunity in this league, but his scheme is read-and-react; you have to think a little," says Marshall. "Wade calls a simple defense. There's not a whole lot of thinking; we're able to just *go*. He allows us to play extremely fast and extremely aggressive."

"I think we're put in better spots this year," says Jackson. "Del Rio had a good defense—I just think this one fits us better."

WATCHING PHILLIPS'S defense in action—the way it bullied Bears quarterback Jay Cutler into an interception, two sacks and a crucial fumble on Sunday—you would think that he leads aggressively, gets after his players. That's not the case. Phillips, says Marshall, isn't a "rah-rah guy." Jackson points out that the coach likes to start off meetings with a joke, to put his players at ease. Phillips doesn't batter his players in film sessions, but he does hold them accountable.

"He's not going to dog-cuss you," says Jackson, "but he demands high play."

"He has a quiet demeanor, but he displays tenacity in the plays he calls," adds Ware. "Instead of talking a good game, he shows it."

Over time, however, Phillips's units have regressed. It's the double-edged sword of simplicity: He gets quick results, but that newness wears off, and his players aren't always challenged enough mentally. "Some of the guys got bored with [his defense] after his second season," says one former player under Phillips who wishes to remain anonymous. That would explain, in part, why such a successful coach could be on his ninth stop with eight teams, and why he didn't have a job in 2014.

But Phillips is back and on top of his game with these Broncos. Considering Peyton Manning's ticking clock and the fact that five of Denver's defensive starters are playing with expiring contracts, the coordinator's quick-burning flame might be the perfect source of heat for the situation. And on Sunday night, even with all the attention on the quarterbacks, it might just have been his defense that burned brightest. □

MORE THAN MANAGING
In perhaps his best game of the season, Manning went 21 of 29 for 340 yards in a 29-10 win over the Packers.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

In a season plagued by an old neck injury and a new foot problem, Peyton Manning displayed the traits that have always made him great: He led his team to the front of the pack, then rallied them down the stretch. Did you expect anything less?

BY JOAN NIESEN

Photographs by
JAMIE SCHWABEROW FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

NEARLY TWO months before Peyton Manning steered the Broncos to a 20–18 victory over the Patriots in the AFC championship game on Jan. 24, the 39-year-old quarterback found himself relegated to the equipment room as Tom Brady took the field in Manning's home stadium. New England was in the Mile High City for a matchup against the Broncos, who had turned to Brock Osweiler as their quarterback two weeks earlier.

Manning watched the game on a muted television with injured defensive end DeMarcus Ware, who called out critiques of his teammates. The two snacked on hot dogs. As Osweiler led the Broncos to a 30–24 overtime victory on 270 passing yards and a touchdown, there was cause to wonder: Was this the end for perhaps the greatest quarterback in NFL history?

Manning, who won his second Super Bowl on Feb. 7 with a 24–10 victory over Carolina, swears he never thought so far ahead. During the month and a half he missed with a foot injury, he says he considered only the next day, the next week. The rest of the world, though, was ready to proclaim him dead. Except for a vintage Peyton performance against the Packers on Nov. 1 (21 of 29 for 340 yards), he hadn't been himself all season, and it seemed reasonable to think that we'd never get to slap an XVII on the Brady-Manning fight card. Certainly, a

Super Bowl berth seemed like the longest shot for a Broncos team with a great defense but barely a hint of offensive consistency.

There was no precedent for the kind of wait-and-see that marked Manning's November and December. The only games he'd ever missed had been in 2011, when he had hoped that he might play for the Colts in December after four neck surgeries but instead sat the entire season. "I've played every single game that I've been in football except for four years ago," Manning said after the Broncos' Jan. 3 victory over San Diego, during which he took his job back from Osweiler in the second half. "I don't really know what can prepare you for something like this."

FOUR YEARS ago, in the spring of 2012, Manning called his father, Archie, a quarterback with the Saints, Oilers and Vikings from 1971 to '84. Jobless for the first time in his career, the then 35-year-old Peyton was being wooed by half of the NFL. He'd visited several teams already, including the Broncos; all of them were courting him with a vengeance. It was all too foreign, too jarring for a quarterback who thrives on routine. He wanted to come home, he told Archie. "Where's home?" his father asked.

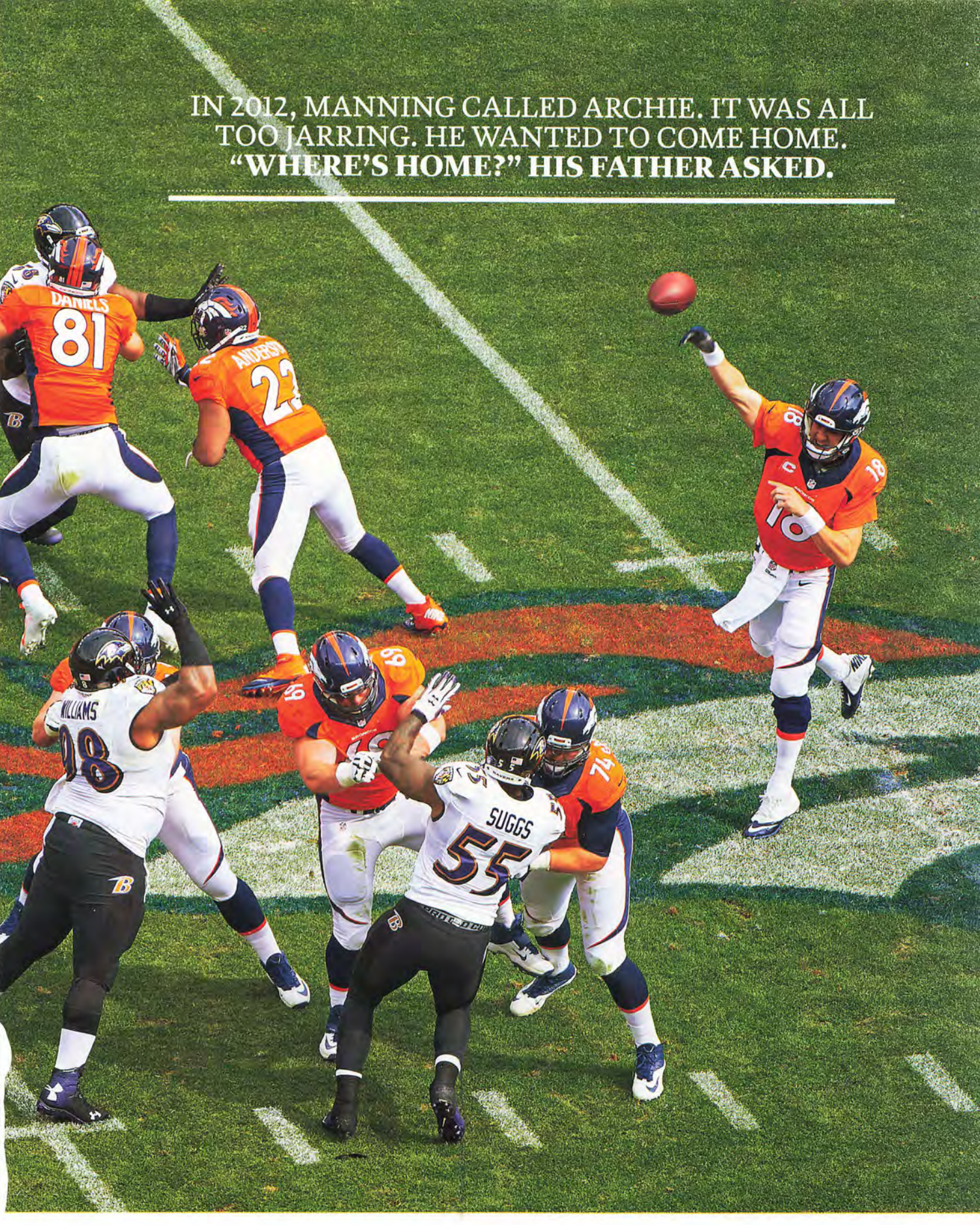
In the years that followed, Peyton made Denver home, and he hoped to lead the Broncos to their third Super Bowl victory, his second. The city adopted him wholeheartedly, looking at him as the second coming of John Elway, primed to guide the Broncos to championships in the twilight of his career. Manning got his chance that first season, leading Denver to a 13–3 record before being upset at home by Baltimore in the divisional round of the playoffs. The next year Manning directed the best offense in NFL history all the way to the Super Bowl before falling flat against the Seahawks, 43–8. When that Broncos team retained much of its offense and reloaded on defense in 2014, it was hard to imagine Manning not getting another shot.

That season wore on the quarterback's body, though: By November he seemed strained and fatigued. That season ended with a 24–13 upset loss at the hands of the Colts, again in the divisional round. Manning went 26 of 46 for 211 yards and one touchdown, showing the wear of every one of his 38 years and 279 NFL games. Immediately after the loss, speculation ran rampant about his and his coach's future (John Fox would be fired the next day), and Manning appeared dispirited. When his family met him in the tunnel

TALKING THE TALK
When needed Manning still ran the up-tempo, shotgun-oriented scheme he's used to, but Kubiak (far left) also persuaded him to play more of a ball-control game, as he did while throwing for 175 yards in a 19-13 win over the Ravens.

JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (WITH KUBIAK)

IN 2012, MANNING CALLED ARCHIE. IT WAS ALL TOO JARRING. HE WANTED TO COME HOME. **"WHERE'S HOME?" HIS FATHER ASKED.**



that night, Peyton's son, Marshall, then only three years old, wailed. Peyton bent down to comfort him. The family stood, mostly silent, as for the first time since 2012 the quarterback stared down the end of his career.

But he wasn't ready to say goodbye, even if football might have been ready for him to go. It seemed that way for much of 2015, as Manning led the NFL in interception rate (5.1%) just two seasons after he tossed 20 touchdown passes before throwing his first pick. His injured left foot made him ordinary. It almost broke him, but he returned, reinvented as a game manager, to lead Denver on a five-game winning streak that's now capped with the Lombardi Trophy. It was the most improbable of runs; against Carolina, Manning went 13 of 23 for 141 yards and an interception, and this postseason, he averaged just 179.7 yards, completing 55% of his passes. After becoming the first quarterback to win a Super Bowl ring with two different franchises, though, the quarterback was quick to deflect praise. Credit should go to his defense—but Manning is also due his share. These Broncos wouldn't exist were it not for him.

DURING THE weeks when it appeared that Osweiler might have the Broncos job for good, Manning became uncharacteristically (that is, just the slightest bit) reflective. Throughout his trying season—the interceptions, the foot injury, the insinuations of HGH use that he vehemently denies—the quarterback used one word to describe this season: *different*. He was being kind. This season was confusing. Painful. Uncertain. But in a sense, he was right. It was different, because Manning's career had never been any of those other things. The greatest knock on him had always been that he had won just one Super Bowl—the horror! The new knock hit harder: He was finished, and not on his own terms.

Now, though, he gets the ending he dreamed about, even if it comes in a fashion so incongruous with the rest of his career. The player who for years propped up his teams, who carried the

JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

NEXT MAN UP
During Manning's six-game absence, he supported Osweiller but made clear his desire to return when healthy.

SOUNDING OFF

On the eve of the playoffs, tight end Owen Daniels took a few minutes to talk about his quarterbacks, his coach and what motivates the great ones

BY JENNY VRENTAS

Late in the NFL season, depending on the outcomes of their final two games, the Broncos could have ended up as either the AFC's No. 1 overall seed or out of the playoffs entirely. And that wasn't even the wackiest part of their season. Denver started two quarterbacks, a future Hall of Famer (Peyton Manning) and his possible successor (Brock Osweiler), and somehow the Broncos didn't veer off course. As they began their playoff run, even Manning said, "I'd be lying to say I've never thought" about it being his last season. For some perspective on the Broncos' season, SI talked to veteran tight end Owen Daniels, a trusted target for both QBs.

SI: *The Broncos have won with both Manning and Osweiler. How?*
DANIELS: Obviously we all know about Peyton and how good a player he is and has been for a very long time. And this offense is friendly to a backup who has a good feel for the game like Brock has, to be able to step in and match things. And having a great defense on the other side doesn't hurt, either.

SI: *Gary Kubiak has been up-front about the QBs, saying that Manning would be the starter when he was healthy. How much has his guidance helped the team navigate this situation?*

MANNING USED ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE HIS SEASON: *DIFFERENT.* **HE WAS BEING KIND. THIS SEASON WAS ALSO CONFUSING. PAINFUL. UNCERTAIN.**

Colts to a championship in 2007 and turned Denver's offense into a record-setting juggernaut in '13, now rides the back of the NFL's best defense. "There are so many people involved with us being in the spot that we're in today," first-year coach Gary Kubiak said during the Broncos' playoff run, and for the first time during Manning's tenure in Denver, those words were true.

Manning came to Colorado to win a Super Bowl and cement his legacy. But now that Manning has his title, it's hard to see his legacy changing. Does quarterbacking a defensive juggernaut really dictate how Manning will be remembered? It shouldn't, nor should Super Bowls, for that matter. There should be no question as to what Manning has meant to football. He's the best all-around quarterback to have played the game—and the smartest. He has two NFL titles, another two trips to the Super Bowl, 71,940 passing yards and 539 touchdowns in the regular season. He has done countless hours of charity work, touched hundreds of lives in ways that you've never heard about. He has made us laugh, in television commercials and on *Saturday Night Live* and even in his weekly media sessions. He's dropped our jaws more times than we could count, with precise passes and instantaneous reactions and some of the most unathletic quarterback scurries football has seen.

If the Super Bowl was it, then Manning is going out on top—just weeks after he hit bottom. And for all the uncertainty, the pain, the lack of power, the quarterback now can do one thing, perhaps the most important thing, that he couldn't do two months ago: say goodbye on his own terms. □

DANIELS: It could have been a very delicate situation. But he comes to us every week and lets us know what the deal is, so we aren't in the dark. I think that allows us to focus, and that helps us deal with the distraction of all those questions: Who do you want in there? Who is looking good? Who does this offense function best for?

SI: *You have played in Kubiak's offense for 10 seasons—in Houston, Baltimore and now Denver. Is this the same Kubiak offense or did it change with Peyton vs. Brock?*
DANIELS: The Kubiak offense seemed like it was a little bit more along [the old] lines with Brock in there, because he is a little more mobile so we could run more keepers and stuff with him. When Peyton was dealing with his foot injury, we couldn't really do stuff like that. That movement is a big part of Kub's offense. But we did implement some of what Peyton had done in the past in terms of the up-tempo stuff. It was good to be able to do both, especially when you are playing at elevation.

SI: *Is there an awareness that this could be Peyton's last postseason, and does that play into the urgency?*
DANIELS: I think we are as urgent as we can be. He's not the only one in that situation, and there are a lot of guys who haven't been here. We are really excited for the opportunity for what it is.

SI: *What was the feeling at the end of the Chargers game in Week 17 when Manning led the comeback?*
DANIELS: Going into that game we knew that all we needed to do was take care of our business and then the playoffs ran through Denver. That was big. Unfortunately, we had a tough first half with turnovers, but having Peyton come in, it was definitely a spark for the team, for the fan base and for everybody.

SI: *Manning has faced a lot of questions this season, about his level of play and with the Al Jazeera report alleging his link to an HGH supplier. Have you seen him draw any extra motivation as a result?*
DANIELS: I know a lot has been said about Peyton. If he is who I think he is, he hears everything, but he doesn't let everyone know what he hears and he definitely uses it. Great players use everything that they can as motivation and inspiration.

SI: *You mentioned Kubiak's leadership. How much do you think it means to him to do that for the Broncos?*
DANIELS: I don't think he will ever tell you how much it means to him, but it means a lot. It means a lot to him to be back here as the head coach, with the team he played for and won Super Bowls with as the offensive coordinator.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS
Denver has won the AFC West every season since they put Elway in a business suit in 2011. Only the Patriots have more victories during that time.

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
January 12, 2015

ELWAY

THE TAO OF WOODY

John Elway sees life as a pendulum, a constant balancing of ecstasy and adversity. With four Super Bowl blowouts and two titles on his résumé, the Broncos' former QB and current architect was sure he had another Lombardi Trophy coming to him–so he built a team designed to grab one

BY S.L. PRICE

Photograph by
JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

ODD COUNTRY, this land of the middle-aged. Even the arrival date is never quite clear. One day you're minding your business, threading 65-yard passes off your back foot, and the next you've crossed some unseen border and hair's falling out or sprouting from strange places. That first colonoscopy, 54-year-old John Elway admits, was a marker. But the real jolt came five months ago, when his second daughter made him a grandfather. "That's the one," he recounts, "where I said, Wow, I am starting to get up there."

There have been other signs. Quarterback withdrawal—twitchy fingers and chronic second-guessing on Sunday—long ago gave way to a more generic yen. "I just wish I had that 25-year-old body," Elway says. So he engages daily, for an hour, in the endless task of remaining physically fit. Today's masochism involved abs work, the gerbil-wheel monotony of a stair-climb machine, and a final charge on the stationary bike. Still sweating, the top two buttons of his dress shirt undone, the man behind the desk at the Broncos' training complex this morning in early December 2014 hardly looks like the most dynamic force in today's NFL.

But he just might be. As Denver's general manager, Elway is edging ever closer to the one thing that matters. Call it The Drive, Part III. Elway's game-tying 98-yard march against Cleveland in the 1986 AFC championship game

established his rep as a comeback wizard, and a late surge to two Super Bowl titles provided the perfect ending to a Hall of Fame playing career. The thrill of assembling a roster should be less cathartic, but not to Elway. "It's part of him being an ex-player: his aggressiveness and will to win," says former Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "He's about winning *now*. He's not building a team for five years from now."

Having inherited a 4–12 roster in 2011, Elway bet the house on 35-year-old Peyton Manning the next year. In '13 Manning quarterbacked a record-shattering offense to the Super Bowl. Never mind that the Seahawks torched the Broncos 43–8; most GMs would revel in such a run. Elway? He smelled smoke. He saw fire. And seeing a burning building, Elway watchers love to say, Big John always fights his way inside. "After the Super Bowl," he says, "I was on that bus the next morning, and all I could think is, How are we going to get better?"

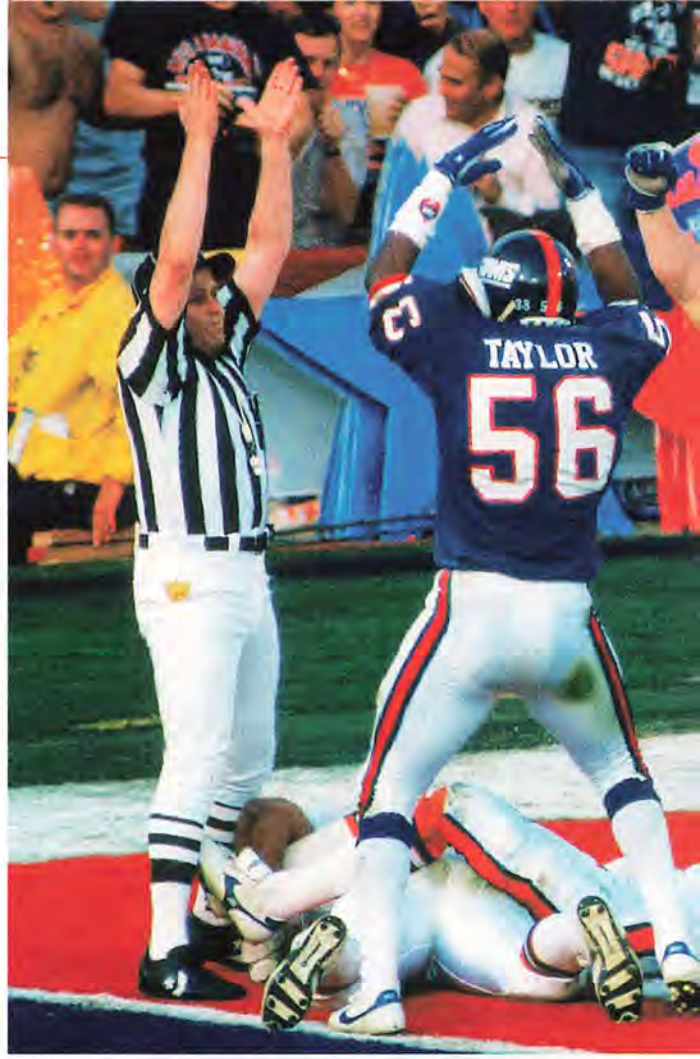
"THREE PLUS, THREE MINUS," ELWAY SAYS OF LIFE'S NATURAL RECALIBRATION. "WE ALL END UP BACK AT ZERO."

Elway seemed to sense, too, that his franchise QB was due to get old fast, so he entered the first day of free agency in 2014 with elbows flying. He spent a guaranteed $60 million on All-Pro defensive end DeMarcus Ware and defensive backs Aqib Talib and T.J. Ward, all of whom would be named to the '15 Pro Bowl. And when Manning hit a wall in November '14, the upgraded D (and a running game keyed by undrafted second-year find C.J. Anderson) picked up the slack. Wins came harder, but they kept coming. The 12–4 Broncos won their fourth straight AFC West title.

"Was it F. Scott Fitzgerald who said, 'There are no second acts in American lives'?" asks longtime NFL exec Ernie Accorsi. "There usually aren't. But I've been very impressed: John has worked at it. He hasn't made any bad moves."

Of course there are plenty of people in Baltimore, Cleveland, Oakland and New York City who will never forgive Elway for, well, being John Elway. Few men, after all, have the chance to graduate from Stanford and play for the Yankees and move through the world exuding such toothsome cockiness. But Elway benefits from the flip side of such resentment. The same people who regarded him as John Wayne in shoulder pads—and we're talking pro athletes here—are rooting him on, hard. Aging baby boomers: It ain't over yet. The Duke of Denver rides again.

"Our old teammates, we all talk about, Man, Woody's kickin' ass," said Gary Kubiak back when he was the Ravens' offensive coordinator. Kubiak made a long quarterbacking career out of backing up the man teammates dubbed Elwood. "We're just so proud," Kubiak adds. Such is the benefit of this kind of roll, at this age: Old faces, old stories, get layered into the new. Even the dead have started to drop by.



STILL, THIS workout thing—it's got to be for a reason, right? Staying in shape, maintaining for the sake of maintaining? Please. For John Elway, what's the point if you're not keeping score? He used to hate how critics tagged him a spoiled brat, but forcing a trade from the Colts in 1983, before he'd played an NFL down, or complaining later about "suffocating" under Denver's smothering attention—that all came from the same place, really. The Colts stank in the early '80s. The Broncos were surrounding Elway with second-rate talent in the early '90s. He had to win, you see. Always.

In kindergarten in Aberdeen, Wash., John insisted on being a captain whenever teams were picked, and he wanted the best players. Get in trouble for talking in class? Never bothered John. But when a teacher evened out the competition by putting one particularly slow learner on his team, John burst into tears.

Now time is exacting its revenge. Elway can still take apart most comers on the golf course—he shot a 68 the first time he played Augusta—but this workout stuff is something else. Today's routine wasn't just for health's sake; it was part of

GIANT LETDOWN
In three Super Bowl losses as a player, Elway was sacked a total of 12 times, including this safety against New York in 1987.

JERRY WACHTER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

an intricate competition. Teamed with Kubiak's son Klein, Elway is taking on three other pairs of Broncos employees. Whichever team drops the most body fat in six weeks wins. The problem: Elway is by far the oldest competitor. He's got 31 years on Klein and has been known to succumb to the rogue doughnut, the second glass of Pinot. So when the competition reached its end on Dec. 1, Elway literally hadn't pulled his weight. "I let our team down," he says. "We didn't win. So the competition [was] continued until Dec. 31."

He snickers at this—moving the goalposts is a perk of being the boss—and cackles when told that the maneuver shocked no one. Old teammates still complain that whenever Elway was losing at Pop-A-Shot or gin rummy, he changed the game to best two out of three. "If you're beating him," says former Stanford teammate Don Lonsinger, "he's not going to bed."

At one of his last training camps the old QB was beating tight end Shannon Sharpe at *Jeopardy!* when Sharpe announced that he knew an answer. "Tell me," Elway said, "or you're getting no balls." No passes? Sharpe figured that for a joke—until he saw Elway's face. "I had to give him the answer," Sharpe says. "He threatened me."

SINCE TAKING this job, Elway has slept lighter and less. Time does that to a body. But there's also the maddening fact that he feels far more responsibility—and far less control—than he felt as a player. Come Sunday, all he can do is watch.

Such helplessness leaves Elway prone to the same REM-rattling fears that haunt codgers at 3 a.m. *Did I forget to lock the door?* The night before the 2014 Super Bowl, Elway stared at the ceiling, thinking, *I've got a bad feeling about this.*

Being right was no consolation. The pasting by Seattle embarrassed Elway, not least because it stirred up echoes of his own nightmarish performance in a 45-point loss to the 49ers in Super Bowl XXIV. "Momentum swings in a Super Bowl are five times what they are in a normal game," he says. "When things go against you, it's like a wave."

This is easier for him to talk about than you'd imagine. Elway felt "obliterated," as one friend puts it, by the tsunami that San Francisco laid on him. It was his third trip to a Super Bowl, and each had ended worse than the previous one. He was 29. "They'll never forgive me for this," Elway said that night, staring into a bathroom mirror. "They'll never let me live this down."

Like nearly everyone else, Elway has all but forgotten that version of himself. It's tempting to take in all that he is now—the car salesman's booming voice, the $4,000 pin-striped suits—and wonder, if he hadn't won at last, whether John Elway would've tried to disappear. But two late Super Bowl wins, at 37 and 38, changed the conversation forever. Never mind that Elway's titles came when he was well past his prime. Never mind that whatever Elway is, winner or loser, should never be decided by something so arbitrary as the final score of one game played with 21 other men.

The fact is, that's exactly how worth is decided in sports. Elway insisted almost to the end that he didn't need a title to fulfill his great promise. But he was lying. That became clear just before redemption. It was January 1997, and after five dry years the Broncos had seemingly built a team that, at 13–3, would give Elway his last best shot at a ring. At home against the expansion Jaguars in the wild-card round, Elway led Denver to two fourth-quarter TDs—but it wasn't enough. The 30–27 loss is still the lowest moment in Broncos history.

Afterward Elway went home, and when his twin sister, Jana, called, her voice did something to him. He'd never cried in front of his four children. But he did then. "It was tragic," John says. "I knew I was running out of time."

THE DREAMS started in mid-2014. He doesn't know why. But after years of not thinking about Jana, John found himself jerking awake because suddenly she was right there. This is another part of aging: Even as time speeds up, bits of the past demand more and more attention. "I look back now," he says, "and I realize how much I miss her."

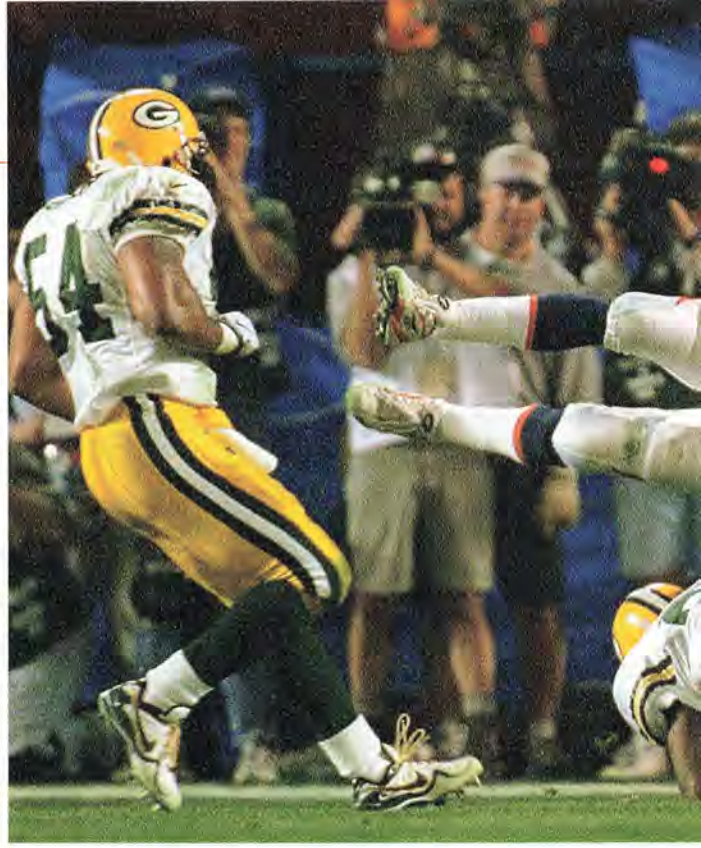
His sister was born 11 minutes after he was, on June 28, 1960, and thus she came closer than anyone else to knowing

what it was like to be John Elway. It wasn't just that, early on, they shared a "twin" language that only they understood, or laughed constantly and never fought. It was that when John got in trouble in kindergarten, Jana would cry *for* him. "She was almost my conscience," he says. She was also his match in competitive fury, nearly killing herself trying to beat John at everything—hurling herself into walls to edge him on roller skates, glorying forever in one grade-school footrace win.

Their childhood home in Missoula, Mont.—where their father, Jack, was an offensive assistant at the state college—was perched on a hill above the track where that race occurred. Jack, who called strangers *pardner* and loved the feel of a full tumbler of vodka, had always wanted a son. A four-sport athlete in high school, he joked that he'd picked long-legged, 5' 7" Jan Jordan "for breeding stock." Their first child was a girl, Lee Ann, and when Jack arrived at the hospital after round 2, Jan at first told him only about Jana, just to see his reaction. Jack didn't blink. "Oh," she finally said, "there was an eight-pound boy, too."

Jack's expression didn't change then, either, but he delighted in the news for the next 40 years. Soon John was Jack's sidekick and best friend. And his project. John excelled at most every sport and was uninterested from the start in cars and toys; Christmas was for bats and balls. The campuses would change with Jack's jobs—Washington State, Idaho, Cal State–Northridge—but he had the keys to gyms and batting cages. By the time the twins reached Granada Hills High in L.A., Jana had shaped into a D-I tennis prospect (without ever taking a lesson) while John had emerged as one of the greatest football talents ever. The inequities weren't just physical. "They shared one class," says Jan Elway. "John would be out playing ball—I didn't realize this till afterward—and he would pay Jana to write his essays. She'd write two and sell him the one she didn't think was as good. But he'd always get a better grade because he was a big athlete."

Who better, then, to keep John in line? It wasn't easy to keep that head deflated, considering all the attention: the college recruiters, the baseball scouts, the reporters, the circling women. Even Jana's dad was certain that her brother was all kinds of great. When John enrolled at Stanford and Jack coached at nearby San Jose State, the tension surrounding the schools' annual showdown (they finished a Solomonic 2–2 during the Elways' tenure) proved awful. Jana, alone, gave the dynamic a dose of normality. On weekends she'd visit John at Stanford, often providing the lone voice of reason when he and his roommates threatened to cross some behavioral line. She grew close to Janet Buchan, a Cardinal swimmer who would become John's first wife. "If Jana thought John was not giving Janet enough attention," says Lonsinger, "she would say, 'Dude, that's not the way you treat a girl.' And John would listen."



DAMIAN STROHMEYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

"I THREW FOR 120 YARDS IN SUPER BOWL XXXII AND WE WON," SAYS ELWAY. "I DON'T CARE! I DID MY JOB!"

The happiest Jana ever saw her brother was at a Stanford Halloween party. He came rushing up, mask on his face, and said, "I'm having the greatest time; nobody knows who I am!"

It might've been the last time.

AT STANFORD, Elway was physical greatness personified: fast and durable, with a cannon arm that even the hardest, most self-regarding men watched in wide-eyed awe. One practice pass laid open Lonsinger's pinkie to the bone; another drilled visiting Packers receiver James Lofton in the shoulder so hard that it corkscrewed him flat onto the grass. At a workout, Accorsi, then the Colts' GM, saw Elway, flat-footed, laser an across-the-body pass 75 yards into a corner of the end zone. "The best prospect I've ever seen," Accorsi says.

But talent can be blinding, too. The coach's son is a sports archetype, shorthand for a heady, fundamentally sound grinder. Because Elway was so gifted, people forgot that he'd grown up with a man who helped invent the spread offense and spent half his days at Montana coaching defensive secondaries. Examin-

BRIGHT SIDE Back-to-back trophies following the 1997 and '98 seasons turned the story around for Elway.

ing high-level football, position by position, was food and air in the Elway home. "Some cogs are bigger than others," John says, "but every cog is important."

So he made it his business to know how the other cogs turned. Sharpe, a middling receiver when he joined the Broncos in 1990, had essentially no experience at tight end when he was shifted there midway through his rookie season. "John told me, every play, what I was supposed to do," says Sharpe, who was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2011. "And he was pretty much calling his own plays, so not only did he have to know the defense, plus change the line protection, but he'd make sure that I knew. They would put me in motion, and as I'd run past, he would turn around and tell me. I got a gold jacket because of John."

After games in high school, while his friends headed out for pizza or a party, John always went home first to talk out the night's X's and O's with his dad. Jack would later pick apart his son's performances at Stanford, and the practice continued when Jack joined the Broncos as a scout in 1993. Many were the Thursday nights when the Denver QBs and maybe the offensive line would hit a local bar, and Jack would be there, Skyy vodka—rocks—in hand.

"All of a sudden you'd ask, Where'd John go?" says Keith Kartz, Elway's longtime center. "And he'd be over in the corner talking football with his dad. He was a coach's son who lived and breathed it just like his dad." Some nights ended in the morning, with Bob Beers (a former assistant to Jack and a Denver scout), John and some of John's teammates waking up Jan to make them breakfast. "You didn't want to be there," says Beers of those Thursdays. Meaning, *You wanted to be there.*

The last couple of years of his playing career, in the late '90s, John made it clear that he wanted to learn more of the personnel side. The first time he sat in on a draft meeting, watching film of a Syracuse cornerback, coach Mike Shanahan asked for his report. "I'd throw at him every time," Elway said. "He never turns around; he can't locate the ball. I wouldn't [draft] him."

That's when Beers realized that "John's got personnel in him," he says. "Not a lot of guys see the little things, like the eyes. The player didn't look back? Scouts see that. But they're trained."

ELWAY'S LAST two years as a player inverted all the disappointment of his first 14. In 1997 he blew out his right biceps in the preseason, returned 19 days later, ran the table at home and routed, yes, Jacksonville in a wild-card game. For years Elway had operated with a second-rate supporting cast; now he had running back Terrell Davis, great receivers, a defense with cojones.

After beating the Steelers on the road to make it to his fourth Super Bowl, Elway called his mother. But she had had enough of seeing her son miserable. "Oh, do we have to go?" she asked.

"Mom," John replied, "I can't win one if I don't get there."

He didn't play that well. Indeed, of all his big wins, this might've been his weakest: 11 of 22, no TDs, one interception. But the numbers didn't matter, only the sight of the old quarterback scrambling and then hurtling through the air, helicoptered by three defenders, for the game's signature first down. The Broncos beat the defending-champ Packers 31–24, and when Elway reached his locker and saw his dad, those 37-year-old eyes widened into saucers. Father and son hugged and at last took in the winning scene.

Up until the 1998 season Elway had missed only nine games due to injury. Then it began: His hamstring, then his back broke down, and he missed four starts. It irked him, but the lifelong pressure was off. His critics had nothing to say now. After John threw three early interceptions in San Diego near the end of the season, Jack was waiting, as always, outside the locker room at halftime. "See anything I need to work on?" John asked.

"Tell you something, pardner," Jack growled. "If you keep throwing at the Chargers, you'd better work on your tackling!" John laughed and kept walking. He finished the game with four TDs and a win, and that's pretty much how his final season went: little frustrations, yes, but a newfound sense of ease. He limped to the end—that John Wayne walk more pronounced with every week—throwing one pass for a TD, running for another and even earning MVP accolades in his second Super Bowl win, 34–19 over the Falcons. The first one hadn't been a fluke. Now everyone had to call John Elway a winner.

But the second title gave him more than just a lifetime of chances to say *Told you so.* It confirmed a worldview that would infuse how he approached business, celebrity, parenting his four kids and, later, running a team: Life is a pendulum. "If you have three here," Elway says, raising a hand over his head,

THE SPORTING NEWS/ICON SPORTSWIRE

"you're going to have three here," lowering it under his desktop. "Three plus, three minus. I think we all end up back at zero. The true challenges come from when you face adversity. What are you going to do about the adversity? How do you handle that?"

THE IDEA bubbled up around the turn of the century, after Elway finished playing. It emerged at his home in Cherry Hills, Colo., in the basement with the six-stool bar and the spot near the TV where his dad always sat. Jack Elway had retired as the Broncos' director of pro scouting; Beers, hired by Jack in 1995 to scout the West Coast, was still there. *Maybe we'll get in on an Arena League team*, the idea went. *John will own it, Jack'll run the player side and Beers will be the coach.* "Just one of those vodka moments: We'd sit around, the three of us, and hash it out," Beers says. Then again, John had sold his chain of five car dealerships in '97 for cash and stock worth $82.5 million. With him involved, this kind of hash could happen.

Still, it was a backup kind of project, pushed aside as John, the former Stanford economics major, explored bigger business scores. And now the pendulum swung big the other way. Around 2000, Elway's attempt to open a chain of upscale laundromats failed, as did MVP.com (a much-publicized online sports merchandise venture with Michael Jordan and Wayne Gretzky) and a $438 million bid (with Broncos owner Pat Bowlen) to buy the Colorado Avalanche, the Denver Nuggets and the Pepsi Center.

MAYBE WE'LL GET AN ARENA LEAGUE TEAM, THE IDEA WENT. JOHN WILL OWN IT. JACK'LL RUN THE PLAYER SIDE.

Then Jack was gone. Father and son had been working with the Broncos on draft prep—John learning the ropes for the day when he'd be back with an NFL team and Jack, 69, lending his usual blunt expertise. Jack flew home to Palm Desert, Calif., on the Friday night before Easter 2001, and Jan found him dead of a heart attack on Sunday morning. "All of a sudden," John says, snapping his fingers.

Jana was a second-grade teacher in San Jose at the time, married with two kids. Two months earlier a doctor had X-rayed her lungs and found a small tumor. (She had never smoked.) But her attitude had been upbeat, and the family figured it for a freak thing, sure to be cured. "I just thought she'd get through it," John says.

Instead the cancer rampaged, hitting stage IV. There is no stage V. John jetted back and forth, pulled strings at Stanford to get his sister into clinical trials, provided a car and bought her a town house for the last six months when her marriage fell apart. During all this he was scrambling to join Bowlen and billionaire Stan Kroenke in the creation of, yes, an Arena League team in Denver. On June 19, 2002, Elway appeared at a press conference announcing the birth of the Colorado Crush.

That same month he and his wife of 18 years publicly acknowledged they were separating. "It was a real turmoil time, the roughest period he's ever been through," says Jan. "He looked unhappy—quiet, moody, didn't laugh."

MARTHA JANE STANTON/PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE/AP

The last blow: On the morning of July 23, Lee Ann phoned and told John to rush to Stanford Hospital. Jana could barely breathe, even with her oxygen mask on. John sat with her, leaned over the bed. They had just turned 42. She whispered into her twin's ear, "I just want to live."

Around 10 p.m. nurses wheeled Jana out of the room for a scan. The family stood in the hallway. As she passed by, Jana fiddled with her mask, trying to speak. John wanted her to keep it on. She kept tugging at it, and he kept trying to be her big brother. "Put that back on!" he kept saying until finally there was one moment when the illness and the fear fell away. As the bed was wheeled backward down the hall, Jana's eyes lit up. Her raised middle finger bisected that damned mask in the classic kiss-off salute. *Really, pardner?*

John had to laugh. And that's how it ended: a man and his fading conscience, staring at each other.

THE ROSTER of star athletes who have segued successfully to management is short, especially in this age of celebrity and multimillion-dollar contracts and the ease of showing up at a studio once a week to giggle and opine for good money. It's no accident that the two industry standards—Jerry West, the all-time great guard who won six titles as the Lakers' GM, and Ozzie Newsome, the Hall of Fame tight end who built two Super Bowl champions with the Ravens—hail from an age when athletes hustled to off-season jobs in breweries.

Running a team is *work*. The rewards are incremental, the criticism constant, the paperwork butt-numbingly dull. The first wave of athletes to become truly wealthy played in the 1980s, so it's no surprise that Magic Johnson quit coaching the Lakers after 16 games or that Jordan and Gretzky have never, in their stints atop NBA and NHL franchises, produced anything close to the results of their playing days. But if anyone thought that Elway, a newly minted CEO, would take Arena football lightly, that didn't last. When, nine years later, he took over the Broncos and admitted, "I know what I don't know," it came off as refreshing. Off the field, though, Elway had been saying that for decades.

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

STUDENT AND TEACHER
John used the lessons learned from Jack (far left) in dealing with Manning and Fox (left, center) last year.

"I'm looking out from these eyes; I'm not looking at . . . *this*," Elway says, fanning a hand below his face. "So my viewpoint is different from everybody else's. I've always fought to stay off the pedestal. I've got to make [everyone else] feel like I'm one of them. When they know their opinion is important, you're going to get the best out of those people."

With the separation from Janet and their kids—daughters Jessica, Jordan and Juliana and son Jack—the pedestal dropped a tad. Elway moved into the upstairs loft of his friend Craig Andrisen in nearby Aurora. He took only some clothes, a Super Bowl trophy and his MVP hardware.

After three months of tears and late-night talks, the facts of his new life hit. "There's something wrong with this picture," Elway told Andrisen. "I've got all these homes and I'm living here with you?"

Elway moved to a town house across the street. He bought the biggest, most tricked-out TV possible, and he invited Andrisen to come over and see. "Here's a guy who's got about $18 million worth of homes, and he's so excited to get his own TV in his own place," Andrisen recalls. "That's a reality check."

ANOTHER REALITY CHECK was the Crush's inaugural season, in 2003. With an eye toward training Elway for a future role with the Broncos, Bowlen viewed the Arena League as an ideal place to master the rudiments of salary cap, staff management, league relations. Elway didn't hesitate.

"John did things that nobody of his stature would ever do," says Michael Young, the former Broncos receiver who served as the Crush's first vice president. "He wanted to sit in on ticket-sales meetings, go on corporate sales calls, understand how merchandising worked. He checked his ego more than I ever envisioned."

Crises were common. One Friday evening that first season, the head of merchandise sales happened upon a rogue box of team T-shirts that needed to be sold at the next day's game. Worse, they needed to be folded—all 700 of them. Young's first impulse was to call some grunts in. "Nah," Elway said. "Let's just do it." And for the next two hours they folded and stacked one T-shirt after another as their Friday-night plans faded. Colorado fans got their souvenirs.

The Crush were terrible that first year, but the 2–14 record offered Elway a moment of truth in the walk from player to manager, buddy to boss. Beers was the team's first coach, just as Jack had gamed it. John had known Beers nearly his whole life; their families vacationed together, and Beers's son, Bobby Jr., was part of that staff. Jack had loved Bob, and John had loved Jack. Now Jack was dead, and John knew he had to fire Bob. No decision John has ever made as GM was more obvious or painful. Acquiring Manning, trading Tim Tebow? Not even close.

Making matters worse, Elway's old center, Kartz, was the offensive line coach. He had to go as well. "We were best friends," Kartz says of his old QB. "He was in my wedding."

Something else: If there's one word people use to describe Jack Elway, it's *loyalty*. He protected his assistants as if they were family. When Stanford athletic director Andy Geiger,

faced with a player mutiny and spiraling results in 1988, demanded that Jack fire two of his staff to save his job, Jack refused. So Geiger fired him.

With three weeks left in the season Elway told his dad's old pal that he'd be gone at season's end. After the final game each assistant was called into a room and told he too was done. It was cold. A lawyer was present. Beers says he was "miserable," but he knows Elway had no choice. "It showed people he could make that call."

Kartz took it harder. A lawyer? Really? And being told not to return to the offices? And Elway, his old friend, saying how bad he felt? "If you feel so bad, then why are you doing it?" Kartz said, and then some f-bombs got dropped, and both men rose to their feet as others scrambled to get between them. "It was a good thing there were plenty of people there," Elway says.

The Elway family doesn't have much contact anymore with Beers, a scout for the Texans, or Kartz, who's out of football. "It was toughest because of the closeness," John says, "but it was probably the best learning experience I went through. Two years later we won the championship. I followed my gut, and it ended up being right."

TIES THAT BIND
Elway's personal losses have added perspective and balance to his efforts in Denver's front office.

ELWAY TALKS about his gut often. "I followed my gut," he says of his first few months as the Broncos' GM, in 2011. "When I was playing, I got a gut about the type of guys I wanted to be around, the type of coaches I wanted to be coached by. Using the experience of 'lost three Super Bowls, played for three good coaches' and then following that gut, I created the philosophy that I'm going to attack this thing with."

He puts in long hours at the Broncos' Dove Valley practice facility, watches endless film, wanders through weight and locker rooms, eyes practices. He talks with players alone—"When you're not doing what you're supposed to do," says Knighton, "he'll let you know"—and steps in to address the team when he thinks it's necessary. But those are details, not the difference.

Elway's gut told him to use the soft sell in courting Manning and to greet DeMarcus Ware man to man—not, as Ware says, "like a rabbit in a box." Elway's gut told him the best way to land hard-eyed receiver Emmanuel Sanders was to ask him up front what he wanted and not try to dicker and deal. And his gut told him to be gentle with Manning in November 2014 when the 38-year-old QB's game began to fray.

"I said, 'Dude, you're so uptight, you don't look like you're enjoying this at all,' " Elway says of their chat after Manning threw 54 passes, including 20 incompletions and two interceptions, in a loss to the Rams. " 'We're good enough now that you don't have to do that. The harder you try, the worse it's going to get.'

"It's a natural reaction for [Peyton] to do that," Elway says. "That's what I did. But it was when I finally realized I'm not the one who has to do it all that we started winning championships. Hell, I threw for 120 yards [in Super Bowl XXXII] and we won. I was like, I don't care! I did my job!"

After that Manning's passing was often short and spotty, but Elway's words helped him ease his grip, ever so slightly, on the offense. "I appreciated that conversation," Manning says. "It's nice to have somebody who's played the position and can share."

Clearly Elway is on some kind of run here. He was remarried in 2009, to former Raiders cheerleader Paige Green, and he has another Super Bowl in his sights. Yet he knows that the pendulum will inevitably swing back the other way. That's why he was calmly swinging a golf club in a hallway when the Elvis Dumervil fax fiasco of '13 seemed like the end of the world and why, months later, he suspended—but didn't fire—his top personnel men, Tom Heckert and Matt Russell, after DUI convictions. "Heck, I've made a lot of poor decisions too," says Elway. Investing $15 million in a Ponzi scheme in '10 is only the most recent. "I believe in second chances," he says.

It's not that he doesn't react to bad news. Elway was a mess at the announcement in July 2014 of Bowlen's resignation due to Alzheimer's disease. He was angry and confused on May 31, when cops showed up at his Cherry Hills home at 4 a.m. to arrest his 24-year-old son, Jack, for assault on his girlfriend after she accused him of dragging her out of a car by her hair and pushing her to the ground. Jack pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of disturbing the peace and was sentenced to a year's probation and a year of counseling.

Yet even in speaking about a subject so loaded, Elway radiates striking equanimity. "A kid made a bad decision," he says, "but he'll learn from that."

How can Elway be so sure? Something in the gut, maybe. A feel for things that his own father instilled in him. That's the strange thing: Until recently, John had kept thoughts about Jack and Jana at bay. Then Jana started showing up in his dreams. And then, toward the end of 2014, John fell asleep and found himself in a room with a man. When the man turned around, it was Jack, for the first time.

John threw open his arms and yelled, "Dad!" But Jack just smiled at his son. And that vision was enough to keep John charged for hours, and hopeful. They didn't come close enough to touch. Jack didn't say a word. Maybe next time, though. □

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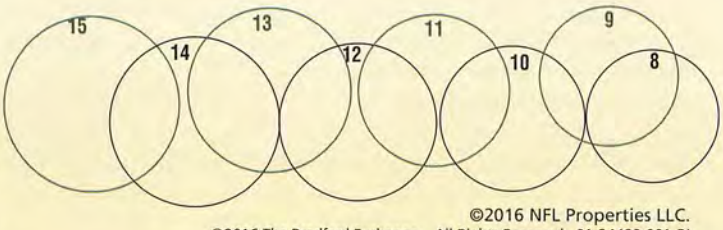

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BY THE NUMBERS

The road to Santa Clara for Super Bowl 50 included noteworthy performances throughout the Broncos' lineup. The numbers tell the story

BY SHANNON LANE

8 SUPER BOWL APPEARANCES in franchise history, tying the Steelers, Cowboys and Patriots for the most. The Broncos hold the record for losses, with five.

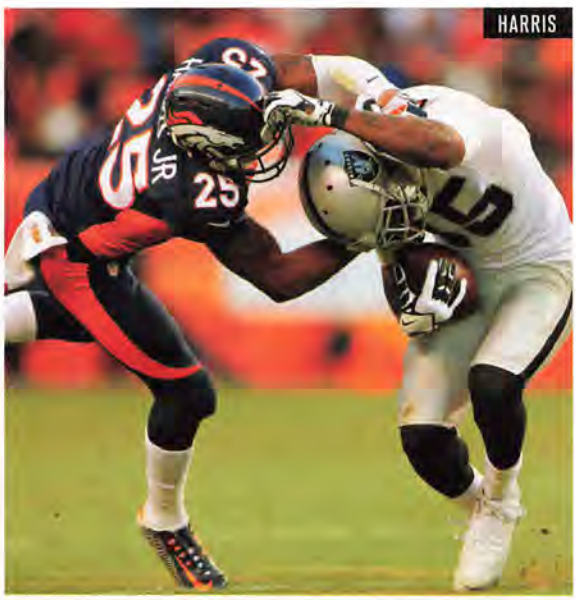
67.9 PASSER RATING for Peyton Manning during the regular season, tied for the league's lowest. He was the seventh quarterback to start a Super Bowl with a passer rating below 70. (Four of them won.)

105 CATCHES for Demaryius Thomas in 2015, the third most in a season by a Denver wideout. The sixth-year wideout ranks first in franchise history with 28 games with 100-plus receiving yards.

.750 REGULAR-SEASON winning percentage for Gary Kubiak in his first year as the Broncos' coach, tying his career best (with the Texans in 2012). He is the first Super Bowl coach who also played in the big game for the same team.

3 QUARTERBACKS who have led different teams to the Super Bowl. Manning (Colts and Broncos) joined Kurt Warner (Rams and Cardinals) and Craig Morton (Cowboys and Broncos).

283.1 YARDS PER GAME allowed by the Denver defense, the fewest in the league. For only the second time the Super Bowl pitted the NFL's No. 1 D against its top offense. The first was Super Bowl XLVIII, in which the Seahawks blew out Manning's Broncos 43–8.


HARRIS

200 CAREER WINS for Manning, including the playoffs. He is the first quarterback in NFL history to reach that number.

1 SUPER BOWL in which the two starting quarterbacks were No. 1 picks. Manning went No. 1 in 1998 and Cam Newton first in 2011.

60 CAREER SACKS for fifth-year linebacker Von Miller, which ranks fifth in Broncos history. His 11 this season were tied for eighth most in the league.

863 RUSHING YARDS for Ronnie Hillman, his most in a single season since he joined Denver in 2012.

17 INTERCEPTIONS thrown by Manning in the regular season, the second-highest total in 2015 despite his missing six games. His backup, Brock Osweiler, threw six in seven starts.

8 FORCED FUMBLES (combined) for linebackers Miller and Shaquil Barrett in the regular season.

4 PRO BOWLERS on the Broncos' roster: Miller, linebacker DeMarcus Ware and cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib.

71,940 CAREER PASSING YARDS for Manning. On Nov. 15 against the Chiefs he broke Brett Favre's NFL record (71,838).

23 TIMES DENVER DEFENDERS hit Tom Brady in the AFC championship game, the most against Brady in a game this season.

14,565 MANNING'S AGE in days on Feb. 7 (or 39.9 years), making him the oldest quarterback to play in a Super Bowl. He surpassed former Broncos QB and current GM John Elway, who was 38 years and 217 days in Super Bowl XXXIII.

JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

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50 GLASSES plus 2 FOOT WIDE display!

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Back of the glasses feature official team logos and game stats

Front of the glasses feature 50 years of official Super Bowl logos

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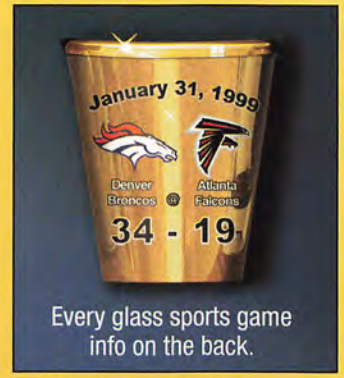

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MY FIRST SUPER BOWL

The 11-year NFL veteran vowed he wouldn't attend football's biggest game until he played in it. Two years after arriving in Denver, he made the trip

BY DEMARCUS WARE

THE NIGHT before the 2015 AFC championship game, the first of my career, I gave a speech. That day I had felt that the guys wanted me to lead them, to get them ready for the moment, to give them something that would keep them corralled. That speech—I didn't sit down and write it beforehand. I just spoke from the heart, and the guys really, really enjoyed it. I told them that iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another man.

The speech was monumental for us and propelled us. It was very emotional. Transitioning to another team, you don't know where you're going to fit in. When I joined the Broncos in 2014, I was chosen as a captain. That let me know that my hard work had paid off, that guys wanted me to lead them. During the speech I was shivering. I had a tear here and there. I knew I had hit home when I looked at the other guys and the whole room was quiet and I saw little trickles and bleary eyes. That's when I knew that everybody was on board.

A MILE HIGH
After nine years in Dallas, Ware joined the Broncos in 2014 and has 17½ sacks since.

After we beat the Patriots the next day, I was so focused on the next game, the Super Bowl, that I walked straight to the locker room afterward. I forgot about the celebration. They had to bring me out. It was so weird. I walked into the locker room, and the people inside said, "Hey, DeMarcus, we're going to go celebrate and do confetti and stuff. We're the AFC champions." *Oh! Oh, O.K.* I walked outside.

This year's Super Bowl is the first I've been to. Throughout my career, I always told myself that the only way I was going to attend a Super Bowl was if I played in it. In the past I'd come out, work, do media appearances, but I'd be home on Sunday, watching the game with my family. Being here on Sunday is what I've been waiting for since I arrived in Denver, since John Elway called me almost two years ago. It was hard to leave Dallas, especially since I'd been a Cowboy for nine years. I had gotten used to the trainers and the owners and my teammates. But in this league, you don't know if you're going to be on one team or another team. I had a chance to play for a great team, with John Elway and the owner, Pat Bowlen. This league is about change.

The Broncos told me they wanted me not only to play for them but also to be a staple of their defense. I saw them bring in Aqib Talib and T.J. Ward, and the team told me, "We're really beefing up the defense because defense wins championships." That's what I've always been predicated on. I'm in. Where do you guys want me to sign?

At the time I signed, Denver had just lost the Super Bowl. The next season, 2014, we had a chance. We got into the playoffs but didn't pull it out. I feel like those times and another year of maturity really helped us get to the point where we are now. We got to the Super Bowl, and we were enjoying where our feet were, but we still had business to do.

Earlier this season, Ray Lewis asked me if I thought we were a great defense. I didn't think so. I said, "We're good." We were the No. 1 defense in the NFL this season, but the only way you're great is if you end up being No. 1 and you win the Super Bowl with that defense. That's when you etch in stone that you're a great defense.

We're great. □

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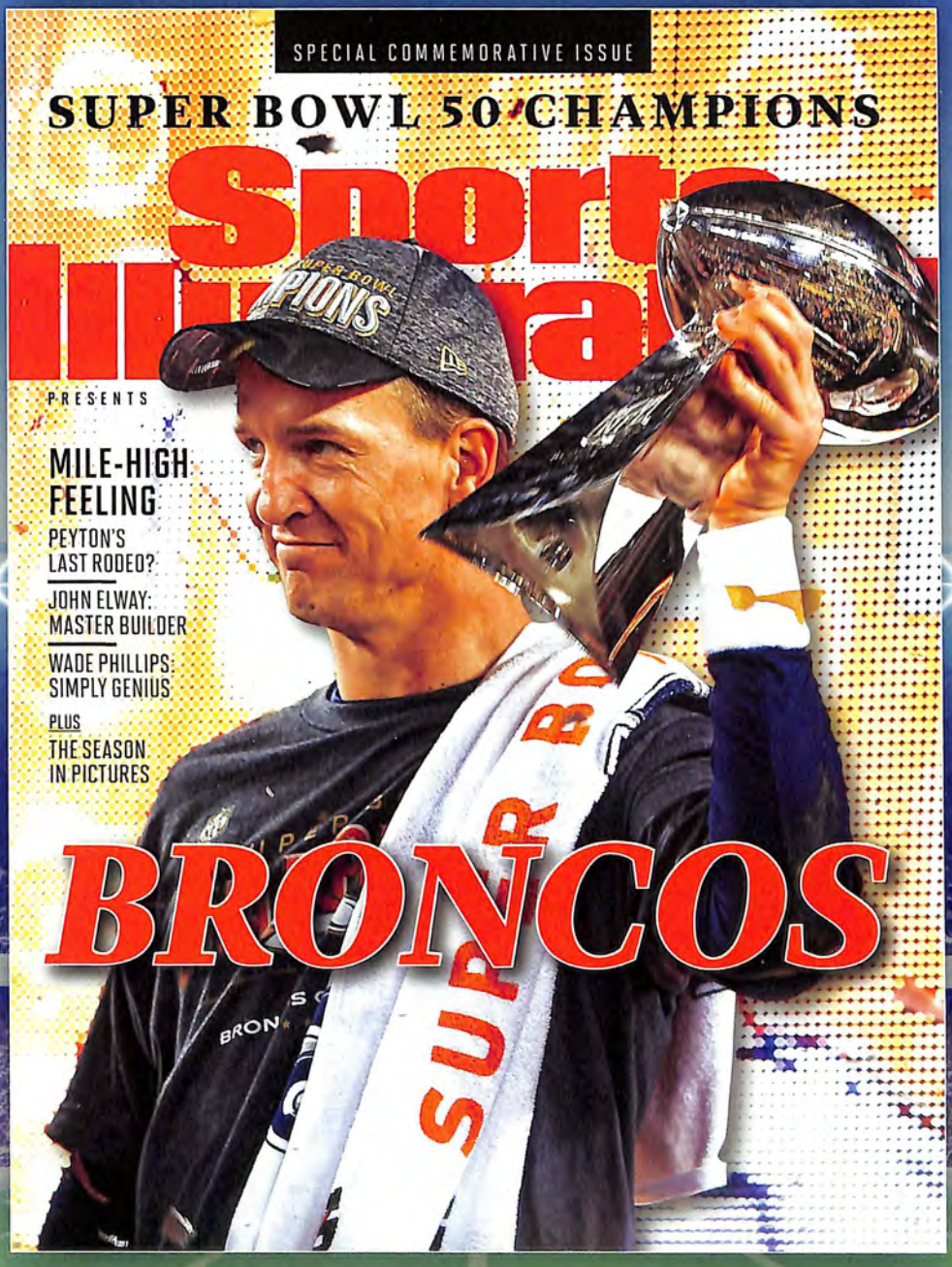

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